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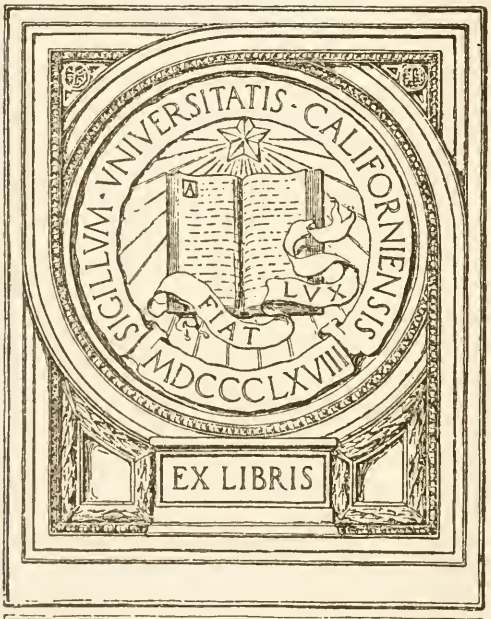

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SARCHEDON

The good horse under

SARCHEDON

A LEGEND OF THE GREAT QUEEN

BY

G. J. WHYTE-MELVILLE

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY HARRINGTON BIRD

LONDON
W. THACKER & CO., 2 CREED LANE, E.C.
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1900

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TO

THE RIGHT HONOURABLE

AUSTIN LAYARD, D.C.L.

HER MAJESTY'S MINISTER AT MADRID

THE

FOLLOWING ROMANCE IS RESPECTFULLY DEDICATED

AS A TRIBUTE OF

ADMIRATION TO THE GREAT DISCOVERER

WHOSE SKILL, COURAGE, AND RESEARCH HAVE

EXCAVATED FROM THE DESERT SANDS

THE ARTS, ARMS, AND RECORDS OF A MIGHTY NATION

WHOSE LEARNING AND PERSEVERANCE

HAVE RESTORED AN IMPORTANT LINK IN THE

WORLD'S HISTORY

LONG SEVERED IN THE OBLIVION OF THE PAST

Onslow Gardens,
June 1871.

190142

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SARCHEDON

SARCHEDON

The Seven Stars

CHAPTER I

THE KING OF BEASTS

YING in the desert — stretched, limp and helpless, in the darkening waste— poured out like water on the tawny sand — two specks poised high above him in the deeper orange of the upper sky—a wide-winged vulture hovering and wheeling between the stricken lion and the setting sun.

Dying in the desert—grim, dignified, unyielding, like a monarch slain in battle. So formidable in the morning—the herdsman's terror, the archer's dread, the savage wrestler in whose grasp horse and rider went down crushed, mangled, over-matched, like sucking fawn and unweaned child—fierce, tameless, unconquered—a noble adversary for the noblest champions of the plain—but ere the last red streak of evening faded on the dusky level of their wilderness, a thing for the foul night-bird to tear and buffet — for the wild ass, wincing and snorting, half in terror, half in scorn, to spurn and trample with her hoof.

Pitiful in its hopelessness, the wistful pleading of eyes gradually waning to the apathy of death; pitiful the long flickering tongue, licking with something of a dog's homely patience that fatal gash of which the pain grew every moment more endurable, only because it was a death-wound; and pitiful too the utter prostration of those massive limbs, with

knotted muscles and corded sinews — of that long, lean, tapering body—the very emblem of agile strength—which, striving in agony to rear but half its height, sank down again in dust, writhing, powerless, like an earthworm beneath the spade.

No yell, no moan — only a short quick breathing, a convulsive shiver, and the occasional effort to rise, that time by time soaked and stained his lair with darker jets of blood.

So those specks on the upper sky widened into two huge soaring vultures, while the wing of a third brushed lightly against the fallen lion's mane, as the foul bird ventured nearer its coming banquet, croaking hideous invitations to others and yet others, that emerged, as if by magic, from the solemn cloudless heaven.

Far back into the desert, varied here and there by clammy clotted spots, lay a single track of footprints, closer together, less sharp, round, and clearly defined, as they dragged towards the end. Many a weary furlong had he travelled, the king of beasts, on his journey here to die; and yet he never was to reach the patch of arid reeds that instinct bade him seek for a last shelter—the scanty covert wherewith nature prompted him to shield his death agony from the remorseless bird of prey.

It is a royal sport to-day. It was a royal sport, no doubt, thousands of years ago, to rouse the kingly lion from his haunt of reeds, or rock, or cool dank quivering morass, in those wide plains that stretch between the Tigris and the Euphrates, the Mesopotamia of the ancients, the Naha-raina of its present migratory tribes. A royal sport, when followed by a queen and all her glittering train, defiling from the lofty porches of Babylon the Great, with tramp of horse and ring of bridle, with steady footfall of Assyrian warriors—curled, bearded, erect, and formidable — with ponderous tread of stately elephants, gorgeous in trappings of scarlet, pearls, and gold, with stealthy gait of meek-eyed camels, plodding patient under their burdens in the rear. Scouring into the waste before that jewelled troop, herds of wild asses bruised and broke the shoots of wormwood beneath their flying hoofs, till the hot air was laden with an aromatic smell; the ostrich spread her scant and tufted wings to scud before the wind, tall, swift, ungainly, in a cloud of yellow dust; the fleet gazelle, with beating heart, and head tucked back, sprang forward like an arrow from the bow, never to pause nor stint in her terror-stricken flight, till man and horse, game and

hunter, pursuer and pursued, were left hopelessly behind, far down beyond the unbroken level of the horizon. Was not her speed of foot the strength and safety and glory of her being? Nor could the desert falcon strike her save unawares, nor the cruel Eastern greyhound overtake her save when she had lately drunk her fill from the spring.

But the monarch of the desert, the grim and lordly lion, sought no refuge in flight, accepted no compromise of retreat. Driven from his covert, he might move slowly and sullenly away; but it was to turn in savage wrath on the eager horseman who approached too near, on the daring archer who ventured to bend his bow within point-blank distance of so formidable an enemy. Nevertheless, even the fiercest of their kind must yield before man, the conqueror of beasts; before woman, the conqueror of man: and on the shaft which drank his life-blood, and transfixed the lion from side to side, was graven the royal tiara of a monarch's mate, were cut those wedge-shaped letters that indicated the name of Semiramis the Great Queen.

Fainter and fainter drooped the mighty frame of the dying beast; one by one large red drops plashed heavily on the sand beneath him, as the first bright stars of a Chaldean sky blazed from the clear depths of heaven. The perishable was fast fading below. Was that indeed eternal which shone so pure and pitiless above?

Great Babylon lay spread out, massive, mysterious, and indistinct, in the shades of coming night. Here and there, huge piles of building loomed vast and shadowy against the sky, far below these, amidst the tents, houses, palaces, and gardens within the town, glittered and flashed a world of lamps and torches, scattered bright and countless as the stars in that other world above; while rearing its head, like some ghostly giant, high over shaft and column, fortress, palace, and obelisk, rose a lofty tower that seemed to demand of heaven its secrets, and bade defiance to the sky.

Here, on the summit of this tower stood a human figure, gazing fixedly on the planets already visible, scanning the heavens with rapt attention; calm, serious, abstracted, wrestling, as it were, with all its mental forces, for the triumph of intellect, the mastery of thought. It was Assarac, priest of Baal, reading the stars, as a student reads a book writ in some symbolical language of which he holds the key. Assarac the priest, the man for whom in that voluptuous climate, amidst that gorgeous people, delighting in splendour, in pleasure, in luxury, in warfare, glory, arts, arms, and

magnificence, the world could furnish but one attraction—the insatiable craving of ambition—to lull which he must rule supreme; therefore he trained himself, night and day, with the weapons of victory, seeking diligently that knowledge which constitutes power.

The act of worship is amongst all creation indigenous and peculiar to man. As he alone stands erect and raises his front without effort towards heaven, so he bends the knee in reasoning adoration, neither cowering down with his head in the dust, nor grovelling on his belly, like other creatures, in abject fear; but, wanton, unstable, and extravagant even in his noblest aspirations, this viceroy of earth has been ever prone to waver in his allegiance, eager to amplify his worship of the one true God into a thousand false religions, more or less beautiful, poetical, and absurd. Amongst these, none could be less unworthy than that earliest form of superstition which attributed to the celestial bodies certain properties of power and knowledge, such as could affect the present no less than they predicted the future. Man's intellect felt elevated and purified by scientific communion with the book of fate as written on the luminous pages of the sky, while his soul seemed scarce debased by an adoration that lifted it at least to the visible and material heaven. On the wide-stretching plains of Western Asia, in the warm cloudless Assyrian night, with the lamps of heaven flashing out their radiance in uninterrupted splendour from the centre to the boundless horizon, it was no wonder that students and sages should have accepted for deities those distant worlds of fire on which eyes, brain, hopes, thoughts, and aspirations were nightly fixed—the guides of their science, the exponents of their history, the arbiters of their fate.

While the rude camel-driver, as he plodded by night through the trackless desert, relied, no less than the early mariner, for progress and safety on the stars, priests in their temples, kings in their palaces, consulted the same changeless, passionless, inscrutable witnesses, for the web of policy, the conduct of warfare, the furtherance of love, desire, ambition, or revenge. Ere long, by an inevitable process in the human mind, the instructor of their course came to be looked on as the originator of events; and that which began only with an assumption that it could foretell, was soon credited with the power to bias, to prevent, or to destroy.

Then arose an idolatry which seemed irresistible to the noblest and boldest nations of the ancient world, which, notwithstanding their own sublime creed, possessed a strong

fascination for the Chosen People themselves. Yav, Nebo, Bel, and Ashtaroth[1] came to be worshipped as living deities, reigning and revealing themselves through the planets that bore these names. The Seven Stars[2] were believed to time the inevitable march of the universe to their seven tones of mysterious music, unheard by mortal ears only because it never ceased nor faltered in its eternal diapason. The twelve months of the year were sacred, each to its especial luminary. Thirty stars were worshipped as the Consulting Gods. Twelve to the north, twelve to the south, were believed respectively to compel the destinies of living men and dead, the whole twenty-four bearing the title of Judges of the World. And finally—lest superstition should overlook one single object of its adoration, or idolatry fail in the smallest detail to sin against its Creator—priests, temples, sacrifices, and votive offerings were assigned to those countless worlds that gem a Southern night, under the collective title of the Host of Heaven.

Assarac looked abroad, above, around, below—with the confident glance of a monarch who reviews his powers, with the critical attention of a calculator who sums up his total, with the visionary gaze of a prophet who forecasts his destiny, yet not entirely without something of that astute and wary expression which on the magician's face seems to scan and dominate, while it half mistrusts, the implements of his art.

He was yet a young man, to count by years, and his dark almond-shaped eyes had lost none of the fire and softness which are only combined before middle life; but above his black eyebrows there were lines traced deep in the tawny forehead, and at his temples a few white hairs already mingled with the black bushy ringlets that, confined by a fillet of gold, were drawn back in clustering profusion to his neck and shoulders. His arms, but for the heavy gold bracelets that clasped their wrists, were bare, as were his strong muscular legs from knee to ankle; he wore sandals, fastened by straps of embroidered leather crossing and re-crossing so as to form no slight protection for foot and instep. His long gown of white linen, open to the breast and looped so as to give the legs freedom of action at the knee, was bordered with cunning needlework wrought in tissue of gold and scarlet silk, its arrow-headed characters displaying many a dark sentence and time-honoured record. A tasselled cord fastened it at the waist, and a deep fringe, also of scarlet

[1] Jupiter, Mercury, Saturn, and Venus.
[2] Rather the seven spheres, or the five planets with the sun and moon.

tissue, hung below its edges, while an ample cloak, white and embroidered like the gown, fell from one shoulder and trailed behind the priest as he stood erect and motionless, looking out into the night.

On his solid earrings, on his golden bracelets, on the fillet that bound his forehead, on the very clasps that secured his sandals, was graven the mystic circle that, with or without its winged figure, constituted a memorial and a symbol of fate, omnipotence, and eternity. If he worshipped the stars, he could yet conceive of a power so supreme as to control and dominate their influence: nor could his religion in its aspirations for this ineffable essence find a better emblem of its ideal than that geometrical figure which has neither beginning nor end.

He bore in his hand a lotus-flower lately gathered, and was careful, with something of superstitious reverence, to preserve its freshness; though once, when it caught his eye by chance, a smile of mingled scorn and curiosity wreathed his full red lips; but he looked aloft again the next instant with a keener and more rapt attention in his gaze. If he speculated on the symbolical interpretation of the plant, it was not *there* he sought the power and lore that should enable him to control his kind.

Though he carried two knives in his girdle, though his limbs were massive and muscular, his chest deep and his head erect, the man's habits seemed those of peace and study, not of action and warfare. His face, for all its indications of intellectual virility, was somewhat too rounded in outline, too full and flaccid, rather perhaps unmanly than effeminate, and bearing an expression of sustained effort, as of one who continually strives to hide and overcome a consciousness of unmerited degradation. There was no sign of beard about the well-cut lips, nor on the firmly moulded chin; and for Assarac the priest it was too obvious that the domestic affections must ever remain a sealed book—his hearth must be the sacred fire of his worship, and the starry canopy of heaven his home.

"And what have you given me?" said he, raising his hand towards the glittering world above, with a gesture that denoted quite as much of defiance as devotion. "What have you given me, O my gods, in exchange for the glow of youth, the dignity of manhood, the rapture and the folly and the sweet sorrow that are common, like cool breezes and running streams, to all but such as me? No wife, no child! None of the treasures others guard so jealously; but, in compensation, none of the fears that bid the brave man cower and the

strong man quake. What have you given me, O my gods? The thirst for power, the desire to rule, the knowledge that causes brave and strong to bend and quiver like reeds in the Euphrates before the breeze that hurries down its stream. You have given me wisdom to forecast men's lives and destinies; it is strange if he who has a knowledge of the future cannot control and warp the present to his will. I have torn open your scrolls by force of hand; I have compelled you to reveal your secrets by sheer strength of intellect —ye are my gods indeed, and I your priest and servant; yet is there something working here in this forehead, in this breast, that seems to dominate you as the goad rules the elephant, as the bridle turns and guides the foaming war-horse on the plain! Your strength, your knowledge, and your fire are mine—mine until these reasoning powers are dulled—these senses enervated by luxury and indulgence. Prophesy—prophesy! Trace for me in your shafts of light the story of that which is to come: show me the future of Assarac the priest—his growing knowledge, his indomitable struggles, his successful encounters, the culminating glory of his career. Show me the destiny of that fairest, bravest, fiercest of women—the diamond of the East! whose white arm conquers nations, whose flashing eyes set towns and palaces and kingdoms all ablaze—beautiful, proud, and pitiless—Semiramis the Great Queen; of her lord, the king of nations, the grim old champion who scoffs, forsooth, at your power, O my gods! and trusts only in the strength of his right arm and in his sword. Shall ye not avenge yourselves for his scorn and unbelief? Shall not Assarac your priest rise on the war-worn monarch's ruin to a splendour before which the glory of Ninus and all his line shall pale, even as ye pale yourselves, eternal host, before the Lord of Light who comes with day?"

Even while he spoke, the dying lion, far off in the desert, turned on his side with one quick gasping moan, one convulsive shudder of his mighty limbs, ere they grew rigid and motionless for ever, breaking short off in his death-pang the shaft on which was graven a royal tiara and the symbol of the Great Queen.

CHAPTER II

MERODACH

THE boldest war-horse was never too courageous to wince and tremble at the smell of blood. A solitary rider speeding across the surface of the desert, smooth, swift, and noiseless, like a bird on the wing, found himself nearly unseated by the violence with which the good horse under him plunged aside in terror, swerving from a low dark object lying in his path. While the startled horseman drew rein to examine it more closely, he scared two sated vultures from their work, the gorged birds hopping lazily and unconcernedly to a few paces' distance. Already the grey streaks of morning were tinged with crimson, as they flushed and widened on the long level of the horizon ; and the lion, dead at nightfall, was picked nearly to the bone. Ere dawn had fairly broke, and long before the gold on bit and bridle-piece caught the first flash of sunrise, the traveller had sped many a furlong on his way, and the vultures had laboured back to continue their loathsome meal. He had been riding the live-long night, yet his good horse seemed neither blown nor wearied ; snorting, indeed, in the very wantonness of strength, as he settled down again to his long untiring gallop, and cleared his nostrils from the abomination that had so disturbed him in his career.

"Soh, Merodach!" said his master, "my gentle bold-hearted steed! I never knew you shrink from living foe, be it man or brute ; but you would not trample on a dead enemy, would you, my king of horses? Steady then! At this rate we shall see the tower of Belus springing out of the plain, and the black tents by the Well of Palms, before the sun is another spear's length above the sky-line of this half-cooled sand. Steady, my gallant horse! Ah! you are indeed fit to carry him who takes the message of a king!"

Merodach, or Mars, no less sensible of his lord's caresses than he was worthy of the praises lavished on him, arched

his crest, shook his head till its ornaments rang again, and increased his speed, for a reply.

He was in truth a rare and unequalled specimen of his kind, the true pure-bred horse of the Asiatic plains. Strong and bold as had been the very lion he was leaving rapidly behind him, beautiful in his rounded symmetry of shape, and so swift that Sarchedon, his rider, was wont to boast only one steed in all the armies of the King of Assyria was able, with a man's weight on his back, to outstrip the wild ass in her native plains, and that steed was Merodach. Horse and rider seemed a pair well matched, as they flung their dancing shadows behind them on the sand. The arms of one and accoutrements of the other shone ablaze with gold in the splendour of the morning sun. Both seemed full of pride, courage, mettle, and endurance, counterparts in strength and beauty, forming when combined the fairest and noblest ideal of the warlike element in creation. So they galloped on, choosing their course as if by instinct, through the trackless waste.

Long before noon a lofty tower seemed to grow, cubit by cubit, out of the horizon. Presently the walls and palaces of a city were seen stretching far on either side along the plain, like a line of white surf on a distant shore. Then strips of verdure, intersecting each other with more frequency, as a network of irrigation filtered the waters of the Euphrates through many a trickling stream, to fertilise the desert in the neighbourhood of great Babylon. Yet a few more furlongs of those smooth untiring strides ; a startled ostrich scudding away on long awkward legs before the wind ; a troop of wild asses standing at gaze for a moment, to disappear with snort and whinny, and heels glancing upward through volumes of dust ; a fleet gazelle scouring off in one direction, a desert-falcon darting through the sunlight in another ; and Sarchedon could already descry that knot of feathery trees, that sprinkling of black tents, that low marble structure of dazzling white, which, under the name of the Well of Palms, afforded a landmark for every thirsty wayfarer journeying to the great city.

But, except the sea, there is no such fallacious medium through which to estimate distance as the sun-dried atmosphere and unbroken expanse of the desert. Ere they reached those scattered tents and halted at the Well of Palms, neither man nor horse was unwilling to enjoy a moment's respite from his exertions ; while the rider, at least, was suffering from a protracted thirst, which under those scorching skies

made a draught from the desert spring such a cordial, such an elixir, as could not be pressed from the choicest grapes that ever blushed and ripened in the Assyrian sun.

Springing off Merodach's back, his master drew the embossed bit carefully from his favourite's mouth, pressing his head down with a caress towards the water, while he administered, like a true horseman, to the needs of his servant before he slaked his own parched lips, or so much as dipped his hand in the cold, clear, tempting element. But Merodach, though he pointed his ears and neighed joyfully, scarcely wetted his muzzle in the marble basin; thereby affording a proof, had any been wanting, of his celebrated pedigree and stainless purity of breed. His young lord was not so abstemious. He looked about, indeed, for a drinking-vessel; but would have done very well without it, had not a shadow come between him and the sun as he was in the act of stooping to immerse face, lips, and nostrils in the sparkling water. With the ready instinct of one whose trade is war, he sprang erect, but bowed his head again in manly courtesy when he saw a girlish figure bending over him to dip her pitcher in the fountain.

"Drink, my lord," said a very sweet and gentle voice from the folds of a thin white veil. "When your thirst is quenched, your servant will take her payment in news from the army of the Great King."

He was young, bold, gallant, born under a Southern sun; but had Ashtaroth, Queen of Heaven, come down in person to accost him, with a pitcher of water in her hand, he must have drunk before he could utter a syllable in reply. The girl watched him, while he emptied the vessel, with such tender interest as women take in the physical needs of one to whom they render aid, and refilled it forthwith, showing, perhaps not unconsciously, a lithe and graceful figure as she bent over the fountain.

"Thanks, maiden," said he. "You have put new life into a fainting man; for I have galloped over many a weary league of sand, and scarce drawn bridle since yesterday at noon."

"The poor horse!" answered the girl, laying a slender hand on Merodach's swelling neck. "But my lord comes doubtless from the camp, and has joyful tidings to bring, or he had never ridden so far and fast. What of the Great King? and O! what of Arbaces? Is he safe? Is he unhurt? Is he well?"

The poor horse.

There was a tremble in her voice that denoted intense anxiety, and the pitcher in her hand shook till it overflowed. Sarchedon marked her agitation with a sense of displeasure, unaccountable as it was unjust.

"The Great King," he answered, raising his right hand quickly to mouth and eyes while he named him—"the Great King has triumphed, as he must ever triumph when he mounts his war-chariot. The captain of the host is well in health, unwounded, though foremost in battle; trusted by his lord, feared by the enemy, and honoured of all."

She clasped her pretty hands together in delight, while the pitcher, escaping from her grasp, poured its contents into the thirsty soil and rolled under Merodach's hoofs, eliciting from the horse a prolonged snort of astonishment and disgust.

"You are indeed a messenger of the gods!" said she—"welcome as the breeze at sundown; welcome as the rains of spring; welcome to the Great Queen and her people yonder in the city; but to none so welcome as you have been to me!"

"Indeed!" he answered in a cold measured voice. "Have I then brought tidings of one so very dear to you?"

"None can ever be so dear," she exclaimed, with a light laugh, musical and pleasant as the whisper of the rippling fountain—"none will ever love me so well—none shall I ever love half so dearly in return! Arbaces is my father, and every day since he mounted his chariot at the head of the Great King's captains have I watched here with my maidens, to catch the first gleam of his armour when he returns, to learn good tidings of him by the first messenger who rides hither from the camp. Not one has yet arrived but yourself, my lord. I say again, may all the host of heaven befriend you, for to me you are welcome as the dawn!"

It was unaccountable that his heart should have bounded so lightly at her speech, that his tone should have been so much softer while he replied—

"I am bearing tidings from a king to his queen—from the conqueror of nations to his people in the greatest city of the earth. I have to relate how we slew and spared not, crushing and trampling down the enemy as an ox treads out the ripened corn; breaking their chariots of iron; taking their fenced cities by assault; capturing and bringing away men, women, and children by thousands

and tens of thousands. All that I have to tell is of honour, glory, and victory. Yet I speak truth when I swear to you, maiden, by the light of morning, that whatever recompense it may please the Great Queen to bestow on the lowest of her servants, to have met you here to-day at the Well of Palms, and to have gladdened you with assurance of my lord your father's welfare, is to me the richest and brightest reward of all."

"You have noble triumphs to report," she answered hurriedly, and drawing her veil closer, as if he could see the blood rushing to her cheek behind its folds. "Great victories, but not without fierce warfare — many a broken shield and shivered spear, and deadly arrow quivering in its mark! And you, my lord—have you escaped scathless? Has this good horse borne you always unhurt and triumphant in the press of chariots?—Yes, I know it, in the hottest fore-front of the battle? Oh, it is dreadful to think of!—the wounded, the dying, the fallen steed, the pitiless conqueror—those we love, it may be, gasping out their lives on the trampled plain, and then to watch on the walls of the city, or here by the Well of Palms, for the horseman that never comes! Pardon me, my lord: I speak too freely. Let me give you to drink once more from the fountain; then will I gather my maidens about me, and depart in peace."

He took her hand in his own, nor did she withdraw it.

"You are not alone?" he asked. "The daughter of Arbaces does not travel unattended so much as a bowshot from the city walls?"

"My damsels are in those tents," she answered, "my camels are kneeling in the shade. I have no need of guards nor horsemen. Over many a league without the ramparts of Babylon her father's fame is a tower of defence for the daughter of Arbaces."

"The daughter of Arbaces!" he repeated. "Maiden, so long as I eat bread and drink water I will remember her by that name."

"And by her own," she added hurriedly. "The servant of my lord is called Ishtar. It was my mother's name, and Arbaces loved her well."

"Ishtar!" he murmured—and his rich low voice dwelt softly on the syllables—"Ishtar, the fair pure queen of night! 'twas well chosen, in good truth; for the moon shines ever gentle, mild, and gracious, like a true goddess."

"And changes, my lord, like a true woman!" laughed

the girl; but continued in a graver and more respectful tone: "The day wears on—he who carries a king's tidings must be diligent on the way. I thank my lord for his favourable notice of his servant, and I bid him farewell."

Then she gathered her dress about her, recovered the pitcher, and walked away towards her tents, modest, stately, and graceful—a goddess in gesture, as in name. She turned once, nevertheless, when he was busied adjusting the bridle in his horse's mouth, and drew her veil aside while he might have counted ten. The large serious eyes, the perfect oval, the pale delicate beauty of that young face haunted him, even to the towers and ramparts of haughty Babylon, even amidst the shouting crowds who thronged her brazen gate. There is a spirit that, whether for good or evil, when it takes possession of the heart of man, must needs tear and rend, stanch and soothe, torture and perplex, or elevate and encourage, each and all in turn; but, be it a blessing or a curse, it fills the tenement, occupies the whole temple, and when it vanishes, leaves but bare walls and a riven altar to mark the sacred spot that it has scathed and blasted ere it passed away.

Merodach galloped on, swift, mettlesome, untiring, regardless of the many leagues he had traversed, as he was unconscious of the double burden that he bore.

Nearing the city, Sarchedon could not but admire the stupendous walls that frowned over him as he rode at a slower pace through scores of tents and lodges of wood or sun-dried bricks scattered through the richly cultivated garden-grounds without the rampart walls, that, rising to forty cubits in height, were yet so wide as to admit of three chariots being driven abreast along their summits, flanked with lofty towers standing out in pairs, bluff and bold, like defiant warriors, and utterly impregnable to assault. Between every two of these, large gates of brass, worked in fantastic ornaments representing gods, men, and animals, amongst which the bull was the most conspicuous, stood open from sunrise to sunset, while through their portals passed and repassed a busy crowd, swarming like bees in and out of the rich and magnificent city, her own especial residence, which the Great Queen had created to be a wonder of the world. What mattered waste of life and treasure, starving families, fainting peasants, the sinking slave and the task-master's whip? Each countless brick in all those leagues of building might be moistened with tears and cemented with blood, every stone raised on the crushed and mangled corpses of

its founders; masses of marble, slabs of alabaster, roof, tower, and pinnacle, beam of cedar, and parapet of gold, might tell their separate tales of famine, disease, misery, and oppression—what matter? The Great Queen said, "Raise me here a city by the river that shall be worthy of my name!" and straightway upsprang, on either bank of the mighty stream, such structures of pride, splendour, and magnificence, as were not to be surpassed by that very tower of man's defiance to his Maker, about which their foundations were laid.

Passing within the walls, a guard of Assyrian bowmen turned out to greet with warlike honours the messenger from their monarch's camp; their exertions were even required to clear a passage for him as he rode through the crowded streets—men, women, and children thronging and pressing in as he passed on, shouting a thousand cheers and acclamations, striving with each other to touch his feet, his garments, the horn of his bow, the carved sheath of his sword, the very trappings and accoutrements of his horse. With all his desire for despatch, it was necessary to rein Merodach back to a foot's-pace; and many a dainty flower fell whirling down on the young warrior, many a charm and amulet was cast with unerring aim on his knees and saddle-cloth, while he paced forward under stately palaces, solemn temples, or broad terraces glowing like gardens with bright-robed Assyrian women, who flung their veils aside to shower greetings and welcome on the brave. The watchman at the gate had long expected such a one. With the first glint of his armour in the distant waste the news spread like wildfire, and the whole population of the city was astir.

So he rode slowly on, the observed of all; and still, turn which way he would, above that sea of faces, amidst that mass of triumph, splendour, and gorgeous colouring, floated like a star shining through a mist the pale spectral beauty of the gentle girl whom he had left an hour ago at the Well of Palms—even the shouts that rent his ear seemed to re-echo from afar in an unearthly whisper, "Ishtar, Ishtar! pure, sacred, and beautiful queen of night!"

The streets were wider, the buildings more magnificent, the crowd, if possible, denser, as he proceeded through the city. Presently, reaching a wide flight of low broad marble steps, flanked by those colossal bulls with eagles' wings and human heads, that represented the strength and solidity of the great Assyrian empire, he halted to dismount; for a cloth of gold and scarlet had been rolled out from top to

bottom, and down these stairs were marching a body of white-robed priests with slow and solemn gait, their centre figure walking three paces before the rest, and advancing obviously to hold conference with the messenger from the camp.

Then the young warrior took a jewelled signet from his breast, and with a low obeisance pressed it to heart, mouth, and forehead; while over the eager multitude came unbroken silence, as Sarchedon tendered to Assarac, high-priest of Baal, his token from the Great King.

CHAPTER III

SEMIRAMIS

THE silence lasted but a short space. When his lord, ere he accompanied that priestly escort into the palace, bestowed one parting caress on Merodach, shouts longer and more deafening than ever went up into the sunny sky. The good horse, led away by half a dozen negroes, now seemed to attract universal attention; for Sarchedon had disappeared between the gigantic bulls of stone that guarded each entrance to the royal dwelling. His armour, here and there defaced with sword-stroke or spear-thrust, his dusty, travel-stained garments, and, notwithstanding bodily strength and warlike training, the weary gait of one who has seen the sun set twice without quitting the saddle, were in marked contrast to the glittering splendour and refined magnificence of all that surrounded him. The marble steps, skirted by their entablatures of gilding and sculpture coloured to the life; the broad level terrace, glistening and polished like a steel breastplate inlaid with gold; the regal front of the costly palace itself, with its colossal eagle-headed figures, its winged monsters, couching or erect, its sacred emblems, its strange deities, its mystic forms, tributes of adoration offered to a host of gods, as the long succession of lifelike carvings on the walls, brought out in high relief with boldness of design and brightness of tint, were memorials of the triumphs won by a line of kings.

Here were represented the pleasures of the chase, the vicissitudes of war, the lion, the stag, the boar, the wild bull, beasts, landscapes, rivers, chariots and horsemen, warriors, captives, towers, and towns. Above rose a hundred stately pillars to support their painted chambers roofed with cedar and other precious wood, inlaid in elaborate and fantastic patterns, brilliant with vermilion or other gaudy colours, and profusely ornamented with gold. Over these lofty rooms rose yet another storey, on ivory columns carved with the utmost skill that Indian handicraft could produce and

Bactrian triumphs furnish, under a roof of which the very battlements and parapets were plated with silver and gold. High above all towered the sacred structure of cedar, which formed that mysterious retreat, remote from the gaze of man, where none might enter but the monarch alone when ministering in his holy office, and combining in his own person the sacred characters of priest and king.

Assarac left his retinue at the gate of the palace, where stood two pillars of sardonyx to render poison innocuous should it pass through, and over which a gigantic carbuncle flashed its lurid rays, that seemed to shed an angry gleam even in the darkness of night. He bade Sarchedon follow, and the pair strode swiftly on through a cool and spacious hall, propped by as many columns as there were days in the Assyrian year, or furlongs in the circuit of the city walls, till, having thus traversed the palace at its narrowest part, they emerged once more on a paradise or garden, where the first object that met their eyes was a wild stag roused from his lair, and scouring with all the freedom of his native mountains to the shelter of a neighbouring thicket.

"She seldom hunts within these gardens now," was the priest's comment on this startling incident. "She cares for no tamer pastime than to ride the lion down, and shoot him with bow and arrow when at bay. There are none left here since my lord the king slew three with his javelin not a bow-shot from where we stand; so she must away to the desert, or the mountains beyond the great river, for the sport she loves so well. Follow me close; you might lose yourself in this pleasant labyrinth, and it is death, my friend — by impalement too!—for anyone caught disturbing the game."

He looked keenly in the other's face while he spoke, and seemed gratified to observe that the young soldier received this announcement with perfect unconcern.

Notwithstanding the power of an Assyrian sun, its rays could not penetrate to the darkling path by which they now threaded a tangled thicket of verdure—the tender flickering of green leaves above their heads, the sweet carol of song-birds in their ears, and a carpet of velvet turf beneath their steps—while they followed the course of a rippling stream, guiding them by its murmur, rather than its leap and sparkle, back to the light of day. Emerging from this grateful shade, they found a broad sheet of water spread at their feet, its surface dotted with wild fowl, its banks fringed with flowers, reflecting in its dazzling mirror a temple of silver and ivory raised in honour of Dagon, the fish-god, and much affected

by the Great Queen, who, leaving her own especial palace, loved to retire here with her women and wile away the hottest hours of the summer's day. One of these attendants seemed in expectation of the priest; for, appearing suddenly in the portico of the temple, she made him a sign to follow, and led the way, wrapping her veil so carelessly about her as to afford ample opportunity for contemplation of her charms. At another time Sarchedon might have observed with greater interest the jetty locks and rich Southern colouring of this smiling dame; but besides his new-born taste for beauty of a fairer, paler, and more gentle type, his heart was beating, as it had never beat in the hurtle of chariots and press of horsemen, at the thought that he was about to enter her presence with whose name the whole world rang.

Immediately within the entrance of this temple hung a curtain of crimson silk embroidered in lotus-flowers of gold. Assarac raised the hangings, and stepping quickly aside, gave place while he let them fall behind his comrade. Sarchedon, prostrating his forehead till it touched the cool shining floor, found himself alone with the Great Queen.

The temple was circular, paved, panelled, vaulted, in ivory and silver, the latter wrought and frosted with exceeding taste and skill, the former carved into a thousand fantastic patterns, delicate and elaborate as needlework. In the midst, a fountain threw its jets of silver to the roof, falling back in silvery showers to an ivory basin, of which the sparkling waters were thus continually moved with a refreshing drip and murmur. White doves flitted about the building, or cooed their drowsy love-song, perched peacefully on pinnacle and shaft. An odour of some subtle perfume, like incense mingled with the scent of flowers, stole on Sarchedon's senses; while he became aware of a figure reclining on the couch of silver and ivory over against the entrance. He dared not raise his eyes, and it was but the hem of her garment that he looked on, while he heard the low musical tones of that enchantress who was destined to subjugate the world.

"Rise, trusty messenger," said Semiramis; "fear not to tell me your tidings for good or evil, and speak with me face to face. He must needs be welcome who carries a token from my lord the king."

Sarchedon sprang to his feet at her bidding, and stood before the queen, as fair a specimen of youth, manhood, and warlike grace as could have been selected from the countless myriads that formed her husband's hosts. He averted his

eyes, nevertheless, and kept his head bent down while, plucking from his breast the jewel that had already gained him admission, he replied—

"The light of the queen's countenance dazzles the eyes of her servant. Let him take courage to look but once, and be blind for evermore!"

While he spoke he laid the signet on a silken cushion under her feet. She glanced at it carelessly enough, and bent her eyes on the young warrior with a smile, half soft, half scornful.

"Am I then so dangerous to look upon?" said she; "the face of a queen should be gracious to a faithful servant. I say to *you*, Look and live!"

A thrill of intense triumph and pleasure shot through him with her words. He took courage to scan the form and features of that celebrated woman, whose intellect and beauty had already made her mistress of the mightiest nation in the East.

She was beautiful no doubt, in the nameless beauty that wins, no less than in the lofty beauty that compels. Her form was matchless in symmetry, so that her every gesture, in the saddle or on the throne, was womanly, dignified, and graceful, while each dress she wore, from royal robe and jewelled tiara to steel breastplate and golden headpiece, seemed that in which she looked her best. With a man's strength of body, she possessed more than a man's power of mind and force of will. A shrewd observer would have detected in those bright eyes, despite their thick lashes and loving glance, the genius that can command an army and found an empire; in that delicate, exquisitely chiseled face, the lines that tell of tameless pride and unbending resolution; in the full curves of that rosy mouth, in the clean-cut jaw and prominence of the beautifully moulded chin, a cold recklessness that could harden on occasion to pitiless cruelty —stern, impracticable, immovable as fate.

But Sarchedon only saw a lovely woman of queenly bearing, glancing approval on his glowing face. His Southern nature seemed to expand like a flower in the sunshine of her smiles. His looks could not fail to express admiration, and she, who might have been satiated with homage, seemed well pleased to accept as much as he had to offer. Bending towards him with a gesture of condescension, that was almost a caress, she bade him advance yet nearer to her couch.

"And now," said she, "that you have looked on this terrible face of mine without perdition, tell me your tidings

from the camp. What of the war? what of the host? what of my lord the king?"

"The war is ended," he answered briefly; "the host is victorious. My lord the king will return in triumph ere another day be past."

She started, but controlled herself with an effort.

"Enough," she answered haughtily and coldly; "you have done your duty—you are dismissed!"

Then she clapped her hands, and from behind the silken hangings appeared the woman who had guided Sarchedon into the temple.

"Kalmim," said the queen, still in the same constrained voice, "take this messenger to Assarac without delay; bid the priest report to me, at sunset, all the details he can learn from him regarding the host. But stay"—her tone changed to one of winning sweetness, soft, sad, and irresistible—"not till he has had food and rest. You have ridden day and night through the desert; you have looked on your queen's face and lived. Take courage, you may live to look on it again."

With the last words she turned on him one of her rare intoxicating smiles, and the strong soldier left her presence helpless, confused, staggering like a man who wakes out of a dream.

Within the gardens, or paradise, belonging to the royal palace stood a vast pile of building, dedicated to the worship of Baal, and surrounding the lofty tower of Belus, raised on the same site, and nearly to the same altitude, as that by which human rebellion presumed to offend after the Flood. Here, at the head of a thousand priests, dwelt Assarac in solemn state and splendour, officiating daily in sacrifices offered to the gods of Assyria, and their numerous satellites —Assarac, who combined in his own person the leadership of religion and of politics; for, during the absence of Ninus on his Egyptian expedition, it had been the ambitious eunuch's aim to share, if he could not guide, the queen's counsels, and, as far as he dared, to centre in his own person the executive of government. Sarchedon found himself, therefore, again threading the shady paths by which he had come, but on this occasion under the conduct of a guide less swift of foot than the priest but, as became her sex, more nimble of tongue. Kalmim made no scruple of unveiling, to afford her companion the whole benefit of her charms.

"A good beginning indeed," said this saucy dame, with a smile that did justice to the reddest lips and wickedest eyes

in Babylon; "you are in favour, my young lord, I can tell you. To have seen her face to face is no small boast; but that she should take thought of your food and rest, and bid me charge myself with your guidance through this deserted wilderness! why, I cannot remember her so gracious to any-one since—well—since the last of them—there, you needn't look so bold at an unveiled woman—I ought never to have brought you here alone!"

It was almost a challenge; but he was busy with his own thoughts, and made no reply. Kalmim, unaccustomed to neglect, attributed his silence, not unnaturally, to exhaustion and fatigue.

"You are weary," said she kindly; "faint, doubtless, from lack of food, and would not confess it to save your life? Oh, you men, how your pride keeps you up! and why are you only ashamed of those things in which there is no disgrace?"

He compelled himself to answer, though his thoughts were far away.

"I am not ashamed to be faint and athirst. I have ridden two nights and a day, and drank water but once—at the Well of Palms."

"The Well of Palms!" she repeated, her woman's wit marking his abstraction, and assigning to it a woman's cause. "It is the sweetest water in all the land of Shinar. It would taste none the worse when drawn for you by the daughter of Arbaces."

"Ishtar!" he exclaimed, while his whole face brightened. "You have seen her—you know her! Is she not beautiful?"

Kalmim laughed scornfully.

"Beautiful!" she echoed, "with a poor thin face, white as ivory, and solemn as Dagon's yonder, in the fishing-temple! Well, well! then she *is* beautiful, if you like, and we shall learn next that she is good as well as fair!"

"What do you mean?" he asked, stopping short to look his companion in the face.

Kalmim burst into another laugh.

"I mean nothing, innocent youth!—for strangely innocent you are, though the beard is budding on your chin. And a modest maiden means nothing, I suppose, who frequents the well at which every traveller from the desert must needs halt—who draws water for warriors to drink, and unveils for a stranger she never saw before! Yes, I am unveiled too, I know; but it is different here. The queen's palace has its privileges; and, believe me, they are sometimes sadly abused!"

"Not by one who has just left the light of her presence," answered Sarchedon, angered to the core, though he scarce knew why. "I have never been taught to offend against the majesty of a king's house—to believe a fenced city taken because a bank is cast against it, nor a woman my lawful prize because she lifts her veil."

Next to making love, Kalmim enjoyed quarrelling. To tease, irritate, and perplex a man, was sport only second to that of seeing him at her feet. She clapped her hands mischievously, and exclaimed—

"You are bewitched, my lord! Confess, now. She unveiled to turn her eyes on you before you got to horse and went your way. Is it possible you do not know who and what she is?"

"Good or evil," he answered, "tell me the truth."

"She bears her mother's name," replied Kalmim; "and, like her mother, the blood that flows in her veins is mingled with the fire that glitters in the stars of heaven—a fire affording neither light nor heat, serving only to dazzle and bewilder the children of earth. Arbaces took a wife from that race whom, far off in the northern mountains, the daughters of men bare to the spirits of the stars, tempting them down from their golden thrones with song and spell and all the wiles of grosser earth-born beauty;—deceiving, debasing the sons of light, to be by them deceived and deserted in turn, left to sorrow through long years of hopeless solitude and remorse. Old people yet speak of some who had themselves heard the voice of mourning on those mountains in the still sad night—the shriek of woman wailing for the lost lover, in whose bright face she might never look again! Ishtar, the wife of Arbaces, possessed her share of the unearthly influence hereditary in her race. Her husband became a slave. He loved the very print of her feet on the sand. Travelling here from Nineveh, while this great city was building, he halted in the desert, and Ishtar walked out from her tent into the cool starlight night. They say he followed a few paces off. Suddenly she stopped, and stretched her hands towards the sky, like one in distress or pain. Rushing forward to take her in his arms, she vanished out of his very grasp. At sunrise a camel-driver found Arbaces senseless on the plain, and Ishtar was seen no more in tent or palace. But all the love he bore the mother seemed henceforth transferred to the child. Doubtless she has bewitched him too. Beware, my lord—beware! I have heard of men leaving real springs in the desert for shining

rivers and broad glittering lakes, that faded away before them into the hot interminable waste. I am but a woman; yet, had I your chance of fortune, I would think twice before I bartered it away for a draught of water and an empty dream!"

He seemed very sad and thoughtful, but they had now reached the temple, and he made no reply. A white-robed priest received the young warrior at its portal with every mark of respect, and ushered him into the cool and lofty building, where bath, raiment, food, and wine, he said, were already prepared, casting a look of intelligence at Kalmim, who answered with as meaning a glance, and one of her brightest smiles. Then dropping her veil, since nobody was there to see her handsome face, she tripped back a good deal faster than she had come to her duties about the person of the Great Queen.

CHAPTER IV

THE TEMPLE OF HIS GOD

IN the hierarchy of Baal, as in other religious orders, false and true, it was deemed but right that the priests should want for nothing, while the altar was well supplied with offerings. To one who had dismounted from a two nights' ride, such luxuries as were scattered profusely about the temple of the great Assyrian god formed a pleasing contrast to camp lodging and camp fare. If Sarchedon, weary and travel-stained, was yet of so comely and fair a countenance as to extort approval from the queen herself, Sarchedon, bathed, refreshed, unarmed, clad in silken garments, and with a cup of gold in his hand, was simply beautiful. Assarac the priest, sitting over against him, could not but triumph in the sparkle of that bauble by which he hoped to divert and dull the only intellect in the Eastern world that he believed could rival his own.

The servant of Ninus and the servant of Baal sat together on the roof of a lower storey of the temple; below them the pillars and porticoes of the outer court, behind them vast piles of building, vague, gloomy, and imposing in the shades of coming night. High over their heads rose the tower of Belus, pointing to the sky, and many a fathom down beneath their feet the stir and turmoil of the great city came up, terrace by terrace, till it died to a faint drowsy murmur like the hum of bees in a bed of flowers. The sun was sinking in uninterrupted splendour behind the level sky-line of the desert, and already a cool breeze stole over the plains from the hills beyond the marshes, to stir the priest's white garments and lift the locks on Sarchedon's glossy head, while for each it enhanced the flavour and fragrance of their rich Damascus wine, bubbling and blushing in its vase of gold. Between them stood a table, also of gold, studded with amethysts, while the liquor in their golden cups was yet more precious than the metal and brighter than the gem. Something to this effect said Sarchedon, after a draught

almost as welcome and invigorating as that which he had drained in the morning at the Well of Palms; while, with a sigh of extreme repose and content, he turned his handsome face to the breeze.

"It is so," answered Assarac; "and who more worthy to drink it than the warrior whose bow and spear keep for us sheep-fold and vineyard—who watches under arms by night, and bears his life in his hand by day, that our oxen may tread the threshing-floor, and our peasants press out their grapes in peace? I empty this cup to Ninus, the Great King, yonder in the camp, in love, fear, and reverence, as I would pour out a drink-offering from the summit of that tower to Ashtaroth, Queen of Heaven."

"And the Great King would dip his royal beard in it willingly enough, were it set before him," answered the light-hearted warrior. "I saw him myself come down from his chariot when we crossed the Nile, and drink from the hollow of his buckler mouthful after mouthful of the sweet vapid water; but he swore by the Seven Stars he would have given his best horse had it been the roughest of country wine; and he bade us ever spare the vineyards, though we were ordered to lay waste cornland and millet-ground, to level fruit-trees, break down water-sluices, burn, spoil, ravage, and destroy. Who is like the Great King—so fierce, so terrible? Most terrible, I think, when he smiles and pulls his long white beard; for then our captains know that his wrath is kindled, and can only be appeased with blood. I had rather turn my naked breast to all Pharaoh's bowmen than face the Great King's smile."

Assarac was deep in thought, though his countenance wore but the expression of a courteous host.

"He is the king of warriors," said the priest carelessly—"drink, I pray you, yet once more to his captains—and beloved, no doubt, as he is feared among the host."

"Nay, nay," answered the other, laughing, for the good wine had somewhat loosened his tongue, while it removed the traces of fatigue from his frame. "*Feared*, if you will. Is he not descended from Nimrod and the Thirteen Gods? Brave, indeed, as his mighty ancestors, but pitiless and unsparing as Ashur himself."

"Hush!" exclaimed the priest, looking round. "What mean you?"

"I have not counted twenty sunsets," answered the other, "since I saw the Great King's arrow fly through buckler and breast-plate, ay, and a brave Assyrian heart too, ere it stuck

in the ground a spear's length farther on. He has a strong arm, I can bear witness, and the man fell dead under his very chariot; but it should not have been one of his own royal guard that he thus slew in the mere wantonness of wrath. Sataspes, the son of Sargon, had better have died in Egypt, where he fought so bravely, than here, under an Assyrian sky, within a few days' march of home."

"Sataspes!" repeated the other; "and what said his father? It is not Sargon's nature to be patient under injury or insult."

"His dark face grew black as night," answered Sarchedon, "and the javelin he held splintered in his grasp; but he bowed himself to the ground, and said only, 'My lord draws a stiff bow, and the king's arrow never yet missed its mark.'"

"It was a heavy punishment," observed Assarac thoughtfully.

"And for a light offence," answered the other. "Sataspes did but lift her veil to look on the face of a virgin in a drove of captives who had not yet defiled by the Great King's chariot. She cried out, half in wrath, half in fear; and ere the veil fell back on her bosom, the offender was a dead man."

"Did the Great King look favourably on the virgin?" asked Assarac. "A woman must needs be fair to warrant the taking of a brave man's life."

"I scarce heeded her," answered Sarchedon. "She came of a captive race, whom the Egyptians hold in bondage down yonder, imposing on them servile offices and many hard tasks —a race that seem to mix neither with their conquerors nor with strangers. They have peculiar laws and customs in their houses and families, giving their daughters in marriage only to their kindred, and arraying their whole people like an army, in hosts and companies. I used to see them at work for their task-masters, moving with as much order and precision as the archers and spearmen of the Great King."

"I have heard of them," said Assarac; "I have heard too that their increasing numbers gave no small disquiet to the last Pharaoh, who was wiser than his successor. Will they not rise at some future time, and cast off the Egyptian yoke?"

"Never!" answered the warrior scornfully. "It presses hard and heavy, but this people will never strike a blow in self-defence; they are a nation of slaves, of shepherds and herdsmen. Not a man have I seen amongst them who could draw a bow, nor so much as sling a stone. Where are they

to find a leader? If such a one rose up, how are they to follow him? They are utterly unwarlike and weak of heart; they have no arms, no horses, and scarcely any gods."

Assarac smiled with the good-humoured superiority of an adept condescending to the crude intelligence of a neophyte. Did he not believe that through the very exercise of his profession he had sounded the depths of all faith, here and hereafter—in the earth, in the skies, in the infinite—above all, in himself and his own destiny?

"Their worship is not so unlike our own as you, who are outside the temple, might believe," said he, pointing upwards to the glowing spark on the summit of the tower of Belus, which was never extinguished night or day. "I have learned in our traditions, handed down, word for word, from priest to priest, since the first family of man peopled the earth after the subsiding of the waters, that they too worship the sacred element which constitutes the essence and spirit of the universe. If they have no images, nor outward symbols of their faith, it is because their deity is impalpable, invisible, as the principle of heat which generates flame. If they turn from the Seven Stars with scorn, if they pour out no drink-offering, make no obeisance to the Queen of Heaven, it is because they look yet higher, to that mystic property from which Baalim and Ashtaroth draw light and life and dominion over us poor children of darkness down here below. Their great patriarch and leader came out of this very land; and there is Assyrian blood, though I think shame to confess it, in the veins of that captive people subject now to our hereditary enemies in the South."

"The men are well enough to look on," answered Sarchedon, "but, to my thinking, their women are not so fair as the women of the plain between the rivers; not to be spoken of with the Great Queen's retinue here, nor the mountain maids who come down from the north to gladden old Nineveh like sweet herbs and wildflowers growing in the crevices of a ruined wall. If this people are of our lineage, they have fallen away sadly from the parent stock."

"What I tell you is truth," replied Assarac; "and I, sitting by you here to-night, have spoken with men whose fathers remembered those that in their boyhood had seen the great founder of our nation—old, wrinkled, with a white beard descending to his girdle, but lofty still, and mighty as the tower of defiance he reared to heaven, though suffering daily from torment unendurable; and why? Because of the patriarch and chief of the nation you despise."

Through all the Assyrian people, but especially amongst the hosts of the Great King, to believe in Nimrod was to believe in Baal, in Ashur, in their religion, their national existence, their very identity. The colour rose to Sarchedon's brow as he passed his hand over his lips, scarcely yet darkened with a beard, while he answered haughtily—

"Nimrod was lord of earth by right of bow and spear. No man living, backed by all the gods of all the stars in heaven, would have dared to dispute his word, nor so much as look him in his lion-like face!"

"And yet did this old man, lord only in his own family—chief of a tribe scarce numbering a thousand bowmen—beard the lion-king in the city he had founded, in the palace where he reigned, in the very temple of his worship. The patriarch reasoned with him on the multitude of his gods; and Nimrod answered proudly, he could make as many as he would, but that while they emanated from himself they had supreme dominion on earth and over all in heaven, save only the Seven Stars and the Twenty-four Judges of the World. Then the patriarch took the king's molten images out of the temple, kindled a great furnace in the centre of the city, and in the presence of all Nineveh, cast them into the midst."

Sarchedon started to his feet.

"And the king did not hew him in pieces with his own hand where he stood!" exclaimed he. "It is impossible! It is contrary to all reason and experience!"

"The king could scarce believe his eyes," continued Assarac, smothering a smile, "when he saw his sacred images crumbling down and stealing away in streams of molten gold. It is even said that he uttered a great cry of lamentation and sat on the ground a whole night, with his garments rent, fasting, and in sore distress. This I scarcely think was the fashion of the mighty hunter: what I do believe is, that he sent a company of bowmen after the offender with orders to bring him back into his presence, alive or dead. They pursued the patriarch through the Valley of Siddim, till they came to the bitter waters; and here"—Assarac put his goblet with something of embarrassment to his lips—"here the stars in their courses must have fought against Assyria; for our warriors turned and fled in some confusion, so that the daring son of Terah escaped. Then it is said that he prayed to his God for vengeance against our lion-king, entreating that he who had been conqueror of the mightiest men and slayer of the fiercest beasts on earth, should be punished by the smallest and humblest of that animal creation it had been his

chief pleasure to persecute and destroy. His God answered his prayer, though he raised no temples, made no golden images of man, beast, bird, nor monster, and sacrificed but a lamb or a kid in burnt-offering on an altar of unhewn stones in the plain. A tiny gnat was sent to plague great Nimrod, as the sandfly of the wilderness maddens the lion in his lair. Under helm or diadem—in purple robe or steel harness—at board and bed—in saddle, bath, and war-chariot, the lord of all the earth was goaded into a ceaseless encounter where there was no adversary, and exhausted by perpetual flight where none pursued. Then he sent for cunning artificers, who made for him a chamber of glass, impervious even to the air of heaven, so that the king entered it well pleased; for he said, 'Now shall I have ease from my tormentor, to eat bread and drink wine, and be refreshed with sleep.' But while he spoke the gnat was in his ear, and soon it ascended, and began to feed on his brain. Then the king's agony was greater than he could bear, and he cried aloud to his servants, bidding them beat on his head with a hammer, to ease the pain. So he endured for four hundred years; and then he—then he went home to his father Ashur; and when the Seven Stars shine out in the Northern sky, he looks down, well pleased, from his throne of light, on the city that his children have built, and the statue of gold they have raised to his name."

"And this is true?" exclaimed Sarchedon, whose love of the marvellous could not but be gratified by the priest's narrative.

"True as our traditions," answered Assarac, with something like a sneer; "true as our worship, true as our reason and intellect, true as the lessons we have learned to read in the stars themselves. What can be truer? except labour, sorrow, pain, and the insufficiency of man!"

"Everyone to his own duty," replied the young warrior. "Slingers and bowmen in advance, spears and chariots in the centre, horsemen on the wings. It is your business to guess where the shaft falls; mine is but to fit the arrow and draw the bow. I am glad of it. I never could see much in the stars but a scatter of lamps to help a night march, when no brighter light was to be had. The moon has been a better friend to me ere now than all the host of heaven. Tell me, Assarac, can you not read on her fair open face when I shall be made captain of the guard to the Great King?"

"What you ask in jest," said the other, smiling, "I will hereafter answer in sober earnest. I go hence to the summit

of that high tower, and all night long must I read on those scrolls of fire above us a future which they alone can tell—the destiny of nations, the fate of a line of kings, nay, the fortunes of a young warrior whom the queen delighteth to honour, and who may well deserve to sleep to-night while others take their turn to watch."

Thus speaking, he spread his mantle over a heap of silken cushions, disposed at the foot of the stairs leading to the tower of Belus so as to form a tempting couch, in the cool night air, for one who had ridden so far through the heat of an Assyrian day. He had not ascended three steps towards the tower, ere Sarchedon, overcome with fatigue, excitement, and Damascus wine, laid his head amongst the cushions and fell into a deep sound sleep.

CHAPTER V

THE STARS IN THEIR COURSES

CASTING his eye on the fire of fragrant wood that burned in its brazen tripod at the summit of the tower, passing his fingers, as it seemed, mechanically through its flame, and with the same unconscious gesture touching his right eyebrow, Assarac leaned his massive figure against the parapet, plunged in a train of deep engrossing thought. The tapering structure he had ascended was built, as his traditions taught him to believe, for purposes of astral worship and observation. It afforded, therefore, a standing-point from which, on all sides, an uninterrupted view of the heavens could be obtained down to the horizon; yet the eyes of Assarac were fixed steadfastly on the great city sleeping at his feet, and it was of earthly interests, earthly destinies, that he pondered, rather than those spheres of light, hanging unmarked above him in the golden-studded sky.

A soft but measured step, the rustle of a woman's garment, caused him to turn with a start. He prostrated himself till his brow touched the brick-work at her feet, and then, resuming an erect position, looked his visitor proudly in the face, like a teacher with his pupil, rather than a subject before his queen.

"Assarac," said Semiramis, "I have trusted you with a royal and unreserved confidence to-night. I do not say, deserve it, because your life is in my hand, but because our wishes, our interests, and the very object we aim at, are the same. Many have served me in slavish subjection through fear. Do you serve me with loyal regard as a friend."

She laid her white hand frankly on his arm, and he, priest, man of science, as he was, ambitious, isolated, above and below the strongest impulses of humanity, felt the blood

mount to his brain, the colour to his cheek, at that thrilling touch.

"Your servant's life," he answered, "and the lives of a thousand priests of Baal, are in the queen's hand to-night; for doth she not hold the signet of my lord the king, sent with Sarchedon from the camp in token of victory? And more than my life,—my art, my skill, the lore by which I have learned to compel those gods above us, are but precious in my sight so far as they can advantage the Great Queen."

"You will unfold the mysteries of the sky," she replied eagerly. "You will bid Baalim, Ashtaroth, and all the host of heaven speak with me face to face, as a man speaks with his friend. If you will answer for the gods up yonder," she added, with a touch of sarcasm on her sweet proud lip, "I will take upon myself to order the actions of men below."

"Something of this I can do," said he gravely, "or I have watched here night by night, and fasted, and prayed, and cut myself with knives before the altar of Baal, in vain. But, first, I must ask of the queen, doth she believe in the power of the gods? Doth she trust her servant to interpret truly the characters of fire engraved by them on the dark tablets of night?"

She scanned him with a searching look.

"I believe," she said, "thus far—that man makes for himself the destiny to which hereafter he must submit. I believe the gods can foretell that destiny, and I would fain believe, if I had proof, that you, Assarac, their faithful servant, possess power to read up yonder the counsels of the Thirteen, and all their satellites."

"What proof does my queen desire?" asked the priest. "Shall I read off to her from those shining tables the plastic mouldings of the future, or the deep indelible engravings of the past?"

The queen pondered.

"Of the future," she replied, "I cannot judge whether they speak true or false. Were they to tell me of a past known only to myself and one long since gone from earth"—she sighed while she spoke—"I might give credit to their intelligence, and shape my course by those silent witnesses, as men do in the desert or at sea."

"Look upward, my queen," answered Assarac, "and mark where the belt of the Great Hunter points to that distant cluster of stars, like the diamonds on your own royal tiara. Faintest and farthest shines one that records her past history,

as yonder golden planet, glowing low down by the horizon, foretells her future destiny." He stopped, and from a vase of wine that stood near the sacred fire, sprinkled a few drops to the four quarters of the sky. "I pour this drink-offering," he said, "to Ashtaroth, Queen of Heaven! Shall I tell the Queen of Earth a tale I read in those stars forming the symbol which, rightly interpreted, contains the name of Semiramis?"

The queen nodded assent, turning her beautiful face upward to the sky.

"Could it all be true?" was the wild thought that fleeted for an instant through his brain, "and had not Ashtaroth herself come down from heaven to look on her adoring votary?"

With a glance almost of awe into the queen's upturned countenance, Assarac proceeded: "I read there of a city in the South, a city beyond the desert, pleasant and beautiful in the waving of palms, the music of rushing waters, built on the margin of a lake, where leaping fish at sundown dot the glistening surface, countless as rain-drops in a shower. On its bank stands a temple to that goddess who, like Dagon, bears half a human form, terminating in the scales and body of a fish. Very fair is Derceta to the girdle, and, womanlike, fanciful as she is fair. Near her temple dwelt a young fisherman, comely, ruddy, of exceeding beauty and manhood, so that the goddess did not scorn to love him with all the ardour of her double nature, only too well. Yet it shamed her of her human attributes when she gave birth to a child, though the stars tell me, O queen, that never was seen so beautiful a babe, even amongst those borne by the daughters of men to the host of heaven. Nevertheless, a foul wound festers equally beneath silk and sackcloth; so that the goddess, in wrath and shame, carried her infant into the wilderness, and left it there to die. Behold how Ashtaroth glows and brightens in the darkening night. Surely it was the Queen of Heaven who sent fair doves to pity, succour, and preserve that child of light, tender as a flower, and beautiful as a star. Day by day the fond birds brought her fruits and sustenance, till certain peasants, observing their continual flight in the same direction, followed their guidance, and found by a rill of water the laughing infant, bearing even then a promise of beauty to be unequalled hereafter in the whole world."

There was pride and sorrow in the queen's deep eyes as she fixed them on the seer, and whispered —

"Ask, then, if it had not been better to have left the child there to die."

"The stars acknowledge no pity," was his answer. "It is the first of human weaknesses cast off by those who rule in earth or heaven. Had they not written the destiny of that babe by the desert spring in the same characters I read up there to-night? They tell me how, in her earliest womanhood, she was seen by Menon, governor of ten provinces under my lord the king. They tell me how Menon made her his wife. They tell me, too, of an amulet graven with a dove on the wing, which that maiden wore hidden in her bosom when she came veiled into the presence of her lord."

The queen started.

"How know you this?" she exclaimed almost angrily. "I have never yet shown it even to my lord the king."

"I do but read that which is written," he answered. "They tell me also how, when she shall part with that amulet, it will purchase for her the dearest wish of her heart at the sacrifice of all its powers hereafter. Its charm will then be broken, its virtue departed. She never showed it man save Menon; for the governor of those wide provinces stretching to the Southern sea would have gone ragged and barefoot, would have given rank, riches, honours, life itself, for but one smile from the loveliest face that ever laughed behind a veil."

"They speak truth," murmured the queen; "he loved me only too well."

"It was written in heaven," continued Assarac, "that the servant must yield to his master, and that a jewel too precious for Menon was to blaze in the diadem of the Great King. I read now of a fenced city, frowning and threatening, far off in an Eastern land; of a bank cast against its ramparts, and mighty engines smiting hard at its gates; of archers, spears, slingers, and horsemen; of the king of nations seated on his chariot in the midst, pulling his grey beard in anger because of the tower of strength he could in no wise lay waste and level with the ground. But for Menon and his skill in warfare, the besiegers must have fled from before it in disorder and dismay. One morning at sunrise there were heard strange tidings in the camp. Men asked each other who was the youth who had ridden to Menon's tent in shining apparel, devoid of helm and buckler, but armed with bow and spear — beautiful as Shamash the God of Light, so that human eyes were dazzled, looking steadfastly on his face. Ere set of sun the Great King had himself taken counsel with this blooming warrior; ere it had risen twice, Menon was made captain of the host, and the work of slaughter commenced; for the proud city had fallen, and the gods of Assyria were

set up in its holy places, to be appeased with blood and suffering and spoil. When the host returned in triumph, they left a mighty warrior dead in his tent over against the ruins of the smoking town. No meaner hand could have sufficed to lay him low, and none but Menon took Menon's life, because— Shall I read on?"

A faint moan caused him to stop and scan the queen's face. It was fixed and rigid as marble, pale too with an unearthly whiteness beneath that starlit sky; but there was neither pity for herself nor others in the calm distinct articulation with which she syllabled her answer in his own words—"Read on!"

"They teach me," he continued, "that Menon could not bear his loss, after she had left his tent whose place was on the loftiest throne the earth has ever seen. When the triumph returned to Nineveh, there sat by the Great King's side, in male attire, the fairest woman under heaven. She guided his wisest counsels; she won for him his greatest victories; she raised his noblest city; she became the light of his eyes, the glory of his manhood, the treasure of his heart, mother of kings and mistress of the world; but she had never yet parted with her amulet to living man. All this is surely true; for it is written in those symbols of fire that cannot lie, and that trace the history of the Great Queen."

Semiramis turned her eyes on him with a look that seemed to read his very heart. The priest bore that searching glance in austere composure, creditable to his nerve and coolness; though these were enhanced by a vague conviction of his own prophetic powers, the result, no doubt, of a certain exaltation of mind, consequent on his previous fasts, his studies, and his long hours of brooding over deep ambitious schemes. After a protracted silence, she sighed like one who shakes off a heavy burden of memories; and, giving her companion the benefit of her brightest smile, asked him the pertinent question: "Is it the amulet that controls the destiny, or the destiny that gives a value to the amulet? Do the stars shed lustre on the woman, or is it the woman's fame that adds a glory to her star?"

For answer he pointed to a ruby in her bracelet, sparkling and glowing in the light of the mystic flame.

"That gem," said he, "was beyond price in the rayless cavern of its birth. Nevertheless, behold how its brilliancy is enhanced by the gleams it catches from the sacred fire. The stars shine down on a beautiful woman, and they make of her an all-powerful queen."

"All-powerful!" repeated Semiramis. "None is all-powerful but my lord the king. To be second in place is to be little less a slave than the meanest subject in his dominions."

He took no heed of her words. He seemed not to hear, so engrossed was he with his studies of the heavens, so awe-struck and preoccupied was the voice in which he declaimed his testimony, like a man reading from a sacred book.

"She whose counsels have won battles shall lead armies in person; she who has reached her hand to touch a sceptre shall lift her arm to take a diadem; she who has built a city shall found an empire. Walls and ramparts must hem in the one; but of the other brave men's weapons alone constitute the frontier: as much as they win with sword and spear so much do they possess. The dove is the bird of peace; and for her whom doves nourished at her birth there shall be peace in her womanhood, because none will be left to contend with the conqueror and mistress of the world."

He fell back against the parapet of the tower, pale, gasping, as if faint and exhausted from the effects of the inspiration that had passed away; but beneath those half-closed lids not a shade on the queen's brow, not a movement of her frame, escaped his penetrating eyes. He could read that fair proud face with far more certainty than the lustrous pages of heaven. Perhaps he experienced a vague consciousness that here on these delicate features were written the characters of fate, rather than yonder above him in the fathomless inscrutable sky. She seemed to have forgotten his presence. She was looking far out into the night, towards that quarter of the desert over which Sarchedon had ridden from the camp, where an arrow from her own quiver lay under the bleaching bones of the dead lion. Her eyes were fierce, and her countenance bore a rigid expression, bright, cold, unearthly, yet not devoid of triumph, like one who defies and subdues mortal pain. Such a glare had he seen in the eyes of the Great King when he awarded death to some shaking culprit—such a look on the victim's fixed face, ere it was covered, while they dragged him away.

It was well, thought Assarac, for men who dealt with kings and queens to have no sympathies, no affections, none of the softer emotions and weaknesses of our nature. The tools of ambition are sharp and double-edged; the staff on which it leans too often breaks beneath it, and pierces to the bone. Moreover, it would have been wiser and safer to commit himself to the mercy of winds and waves than to

depend on the wilfulness of a woman, even though she wore a crown. Already the queen's mood had changed: her face had resumed its habitual expression of calm, indolent, and somewhat voluptuous repose.

"No more to-night," she said, with a gracious gesture as of thanks and dismissal. "There is much to be done before the return in triumph of my lord the king. To-morrow you will carry my commands to the captains within the city, bidding them have all their preparations made for the reception of the conquerors. Let them assemble their companies under shield; let the chariots and horsemen be drawn up in the great square over against the palace; and let the archers look that their bows have new strings. You can answer for your own people here?"

"For every hand that bears a lotus in temple, palace, or streets—two thousand in all, without counting the prophets of the grove, and the priests of Baal, outside the walls."

"Enough," said the queen; "you have done well. I, too, can read in the future more and mightier things than you have imparted to me to-night."

She wrapped her mantle round her to depart, not suffering Assarac to attend her one step on her way. Kalmim, she said, was waiting in the garden, and would accompany her to the palace. So she walked slowly down the winding staircase, grave, abstracted, as though revolving some weighty purpose in her mind. At its foot she started to see the recumbent figure of Sarchedon buried in profound sleep.

Was it a fatality of the stars? Was it an impulse of womanhood? She bent over that beautiful unconscious face till her breath stirred the curls on its comely brow, then, with a gesture almost fierce in its passionate energy, snatched the famous amulet from her neck, and laid it on his breast.

"It is a rash purchase," she muttered; "but I am willing to pay the price."

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CHAPTER VI

A DREAMER OF DREAMS

HE was sleeping, yet not so sound but that his rest was visited by a strange and terrifying dream.

He thought he was in the desert, galloping his good horse in pursuit of an ostrich, winged with plumes worthy to tuft the spears that guarded the Great King's tent. But for all his efforts of voice, hand, and frame, Merodach laboured strangely in the deep sand, of which the long-legged bird threw back such volumes as to choke his lips and nostrils, wrapping him in a dim revolving cloud, that whirled and towered to the sky. Like a stab came the conviction that he was in the midst of the pitiless simoom, and he must die. Once more he strove to rouse Merodach with heel and bridle; but the horse seemed turned to stone, till, plunging wildly, he struggled forward, only to sink under his rider and disappear beneath the sand. Then the cloud burst asunder to reveal the glories of a dying sunset, fading into the purple sea.

He was on foot in the desert, fainting, weary, and sore athirst; but he heard the night-breeze sighing through palms and whispering in lofty poplars; he heard the cool ripple of water against the shore, and the pleasant welcome of a stream, singing in starts of broken melody as it danced down to meet the waves; then he saw a yoke of oxen, a camel at rest, a few huts, and a boat drawn up high and dry on the beach. He was no longer a warrior in the armies of the Great King, but a rude fisherman amongst fishermen. He ate of their bread, he drank from their pitcher; yet was he still hungry and athirst, still wore a sword at his girdle and carried a bow in his hand. He took his share of their labour; he drew in their nets. It seemed to him he had seen their faces before, though they knew him not; but he marvelled why they moved so slowly, and neither spoke nor smiled. While he helped them, too, it was as if the whole weight of rope and meshes hung on his arm alone. So night fell; and they

took him into a hut, pointing to a cruse of water and a mantle spread in the corner, but withdrawing in the same sad silence, calm and grave, like those who mourn for the dead.

He could not sleep. The moon rose and shone in on him where he lay. After long hours of tossing troubled waking, a figure blocked the window where her rays streamed in on his couch. Then a great horror came over him without cause or reason, and tugging hard to draw his sword, he found it fastened in the sheath. Solemnly, slowly the figure signed to follow. Leaving his couch, he felt his heart leap, for it resembled Ishtar! But in the porch of the hut he seemed to recognise the clear proud features of the queen. Nevertheless, when its face was turned to the moonlight, he knew it was Assarac under the garb of a fisherman, but bearing the lotus-flower always in his hand. Without exchanging word or look, with averted eyes and stealthy steps, these two set the little bark afloat and took the oars. Then at last was broken the long weary silence, by a voice that came up from the deep, saying, "Ferrymen, bring over your dead!"

Light, buoyant, and high in the water, the boat had danced like a sea-bird on the surface; but now, though never a form was seen nor sound heard, she began to sink—deeper, deeper, so that the waves seemed to peer over her sides, leaping and sporting about her in cruel mockery, as though eager to break in and send her down. It was a hard task to row that heavy freight out to sea. Weary and horror-stricken he tugged at his oar till the sweat dropped from his brow. The moon went down, and a great darkness settled on the waters—the thick clogging waters, through which their oars passed so heavily. Was it the sea of the plain whereon they were embarked? Yes, surely, it must be the sea of the plain, the Dead Sea. Was he never to approach the term of this numbing oppressive labour? Must he row on for ever and ever, without pause or respite, having bid his last farewell to the shores of earth and the light of day? Thus thinking, he felt the boat's keel grate against the bottom, while the oar started from his hand.

He took courage to look about him; but mortal eye could not pierce that thick darkness; and though the toil a while ago had been so severe, a chill air curdled his blood, and crept into his very heart. Still and silent as the grave seemed that shadowy land, till the same voice he had heard

on the other shore called out the name of one he knew well and loved with a brother's love. There was no answer; but the boat lightened perceptibly, and her keel no longer touched the shingle. Another name was called, and yet another, always in the same calm passionless accents, always with the same strange solemn result. At every summons the boat rose higher in the water. When Sataspes was called, she swung to the flow and wash of the sluggish wave against her sides; at the name of Ninus, the Great King, she floated free and unencumbered as before she put out on her mysterious voyage. With a heart lightened as was the boat that bore him, he pushed her off to return; for something warned him that now his task was done. He would fain have spoken with Assarac; but the surrounding gloom seemed so to oppress his lungs and chest, that the words formed by his tongue could not find vent through his lips.

Once more he was bending to the oar, when, as it were out of his own heart, came a voice whispering his name, "Sarchedon! Sarchedon!" in low sweet tones, which yet he knew vibrated with the sentence of his doom. An unseen power raised him to his feet, and would have lifted him to shore, but that the priest held him back by his coarse fisher's garment, which dragged on chest and throat till he was fairly choked. Then, in extremity of fear and agony, he found his voice to call on Assarac for help at the moment when his vesture, yielding to the strain laid on it, parted asunder to let the cold night air in on his naked breast.

So he awoke, scared, trembling, panting for breath, and even in his waking seemed still wrapped in the gloom of that Isle of Shadows—seemed still to catch the tread of muffled footsteps, the breath of airy whispers, faint echoes from another world.

In that age, and amongst a people ever striving after a mystic ideal, yearning for communion with a higher world, dreams, and the interpretations thereof, were held of no small account. Sarchedon, warrior though he was, and, like his great chief, little imbued with the superstitions of his time and country, could not yet pass over such a scene as his imagination had even now pictured without much cogitation and concern. He sat up and considered it in no small perplexity, inclining to regard the vision now as an omen of fortune, anon as a warning of fate. In his suffocating struggles to wake, his hands had been pressed close against his breast; a few moments elapsed ere he

became conscious that he held in them a jewel he had never seen before. Rising from his couch at the foot of the tower, he hastened to examine it by starlight under the open sky. It consisted of an emerald, on which was cut the figure of a dove with outspread wings, following, as it seemed, the course of an arrow flying upward through the air. That it had come to him by supernatural influences during his sleep, he never doubted, and interpreted it, as men always do interpret the inexplicable, in the manner most agreeable to his own wishes. This dove, he said to himself, must mean the girl he had so lately seen at the Well of Palms; for what could be more dove-like than the maiden sweetness and innocent bearing of Ishtar? The arrow doubtless signified, in its upward flight, his own future career. He would become illustrious as a warrior, and Ishtar would follow him in his brilliant course to fame. Was it an arrow, or the initial of a name? He was forced to confess, from its shape and direction, that it seemed intended to represent the weapon itself, and not the letter of which he would fain consider it a symbol. Nevertheless, it must be a sign that the gods intended him for great things, and it should be no fault of his if the only woman who had yet touched his heart did not share with him the good fortune thus promised by the stars.

Meantime it wanted many hours of dawn; so he returned to his cushions and mantle for the remainder of his night's rest, stopping by the table at which he had sat with Assarac in the evening for a pull at the golden flagon, not yet emptied of its good Damascus wine. Nevertheless, long before sunrise, he awoke refreshed, invigorated, happy; feeling the amulet resting on his breast, he accepted its presence for a fortunate omen; and ere daylight paled the beacon-fire on the tower of Belus, was galloping Merodach through the desert on his way to the Well of Palms.

"Surely," thought this dreamer, "she will be watching there for the first glitter of spears that shall give token of her father's return? Then will I tell her when to expect the host, and how to distinguish between its vanguard and the spearmen of its strength, having Arbaces at their head, who march with the chariot of the Great King. She will give me to drink, and I will say unto her—Maiden, as this draught of water to one athirst and stifled with the desert sand, so is a whisper from the lips and a glance from the eyes of the fairest damsel in all the land of Shinar to him who has ridden from the great city only to look on her

face ere he departs to see her no more. Then she cannot but lift her veil, and speak kindly to me, bidding me tarry but a few moments, while she draws water for my horse. So will I tell her the whole tale; and hereafter, when my lord the king has rewarded his warriors for service done with bow and spear, I will take to Arbaces a score of camels, a hundred sheep, and a talent of gold, together with the armour I won of that swarthy giant beyond the sweet river; and how shall he say me nay? So will I lead her home to my tent, and then shall I have attained full happiness, and need ask for nothing more on earth."

Thus it fell out that Kalmim, arriving in the temple of Baal soon after daybreak, missed both the object of her real and her fictitious search. The queen after a heated restless night, bade her chief tiring-woman seek in that edifice for an amulet, which Semiramis affirmed she could only have dropped at the foot of the tower of Belus, where someone, she added, was sleeping, who must be brought to her and interrogated forthwith. Kalmim's experience, in her own person and that of her mistress, led her at once to guess the truth; therefore she hurried off to apprise Sarchedon he was wanted without delay in the royal palace. On her arrival, it might be said that she found the nest still warm, though the bird had flown; for a priest was carrying away the cloak and cushions that had formed the young man's couch, and his dark eyes glittered with a roguish smile while he peered into the flagon of Damascus, to find little left in it but dregs.

"These warriors seem to know the use of good wine when they can get it," said he, "and I doubt not it sings and mantles under helm of steel no less than linen tiara or fillet of gold; but they clasp bow and spear through many a long night for one that they spend with goblet of Ophir in hand. Men sleep little in the camp too, and feed sparingly, they tell me, nor day after day must they be cheered by the sight of a woman's veil or the sound of a woman's voice. To say nothing of a fierce enemy and a place in the fore-front of the battle between two hosts in array, where it is scarcely more dangerous to fight than to fly. Truly it is better to be a servant of Baal than of the Great King."

"It is better to be a boar in the marshes than a lion in the mountain!" retorted Kalmim with high disdain; "a vulture battening on a dead camel than an eagle striking the wild goat from its rock! Conquering or conquered, up

or down, a warrior is at least a *man*, and a match for men!"

"While a priest is a match for women," answered the other, laughing. "Is that what you would say? Nevertheless, Kalmim, it must be a priest who will serve your turn this morning, for there are here a thousand in the temple, and never a hand among us to draw bow-string or close round the shaft of a spear."

"There was a warrior in the porch even now," replied Kalmim; "a goodly young warrior with dark flowing locks, and a chin nearly as smooth, Beladon, as your own. What have you done with him? He bore hither the Great King's signet, and if he has come by harm, not all the gods of all your temples will shield you from the fair face that never looked on man in anger but he was consumed."

Beladon, a handsome young priest, with bright roguish eyes and swarthy complexion, turned pale while she spoke —pale even through the rich crimson of his cheek and the blue tint of lips and chin, where his beard was close-shaven, and rubbed down with pumice-stone in imitation of Assarac's smooth unmanly face.

"The youth lay here scarce an hour ago," said he, trembling. "He mounted the noblest steed that ever wore a bridle—a white horse, with eyes of fire—and rode off through the great Brazen Gate into the desert like an arrow from a bow. Surely he will return."

Kalmim burst out laughing at his discomposure.

"Surely he will return!" she repeated; "and when he does return, surely you will bring him to me by the path through the great paradise without delay. Semiramis hath been dealing justice amongst the people since sunrise, but she will pass the heat of the day as usual in the fishing temple, and you will find me in its porch. You do not fear to present yourself before Dagon? His worship requires no sacrifice of sheep nor oxen, no blood of priests to flow from the gashes they cut in their naked flesh, before his altar."

She spoke in a jesting tone ill befitting the solemnity of the subject, and he answered in the same vein.

"The sheep and oxen we offer are consumed without doubt by Baal himself, while his servants live miraculously on the light of his countenance and the fragments that he leaves! Touching our self-inflicted wounds, notwithstanding all the blood spilt before the people, we scarcely feel the pain; and this too cannot but be by a miracle of the god.

I make no secret with you of our mysteries. Tell me, in return, what mean these warlike preparations that have set the whole city astir to-day?"

Her tone was still of banter and sarcasm.

"Would you wish the Great King to be received," said she, "with no more ceremony than a shepherd bringing a stray lamb in from the wilderness on his shoulders? When he returns a conqueror, shall not the triumph be worthy of the victory?"

"But if every man who can bear arms is to stand forth in array with bow and spear; if the women and children, on pain of death, are not to come down into the streets; if the priests of Baal and the prophets of the grove are to be marshalled like warriors, with knives unsheathed and sacrificing weapons in hand, our welcome will seem to Ninus more like the assault of a fenced city than the return of my lord the king to his home!"

"So be it," answered Kalmim. "It is not the flash of a blade nor the gleam of a spear that will frighten the old king. By the serpent of Ashtaroth, he fears neither man nor demon; and when his queen raised a temple in Bactria to Abitur of the Mountains, he profaned his altar and defied the chief of the devils in sight of our whole army. It angered her, and she hath not forgotten it. Why, men say, he believes no more in Baal than—than you do yourselves!"

He looked about him in alarm.

"Hush!" said he. "It is not for me to judge between my gods and my lord the king. The divining cup of Assarac has not failed to tell him that Ninus shall one day take his place with the Thirteen Gods. It may be that he knows the golden throne is waiting for him even now."

He scrutinised her face narrowly, but saw on it only a light and careless smile.

"Were I the queen, I'd have a younger one next time," was her reply. "Of your years, say you? No, thank you, Beladon—not for me. Well, you may come with me to the Jasper Gate and as far as the outer court; I dare not pass alone through all those oxen, lowing, poor things, as if they knew not one of them would be left alive to-day at noon."

CHAPTER VII

THE KING OF NATIONS

LEANING on his spear within a day's march of the great city, the tall figure of a warrior loomed massive and indistinct in the early light of morning breaking on the Assyrian camp. Line by line, shade by shade, as dawn stole slowly upward, his form came out in bolder relief. Presently a dark blurred mass, some few paces off, took the shape of a sleeping camel; soon shadowy tents, dusky banners, spoil, arms, accoutrements, all the encumbrances of an army on the march, grew into their real outline, filled with their respective colours; and the man's features, under his steel head-piece, became plainly visible in the light of day. He was arrayed in the utmost splendour of armour and apparel. The former, inlaid throughout with gold, shone bright and polished like a mirror, though the goodly silks and heavy embroidery that formed the latter were sadly rent and frayed by the press of many a hot encounter, the wear and tear of many a weary march. He wore in his girdle a short straight sword with jewelled hilt and ornamented scabbard, carried a bow and quiver of arrows at his back, and a shield studded with precious stones on his arm. From his shoulders hung an ample mantle of crimson silk, bordered with deep fringes of gold; while the head of the spear, or rather javelin, on which he rested, though broad, sharp, and heavy, was plated and ornamented with the same costly metal. In such an arm it seemed no doubt a formidable weapon; for the man's square frame and weighty limbs denoted great personal strength; while his marked features wore an expression of habitual fierceness, in accordance with a swarthy complexion, thick black brows, and ample curling beard.

He was buried in thought of no pleasing nature, to judge by the working of his lips and the scowling glances he directed towards a tent standing apart, of which two upright

spears tufted with ostrich-plumes marked, and seemed to guard, the entrance.

As morning brightened, the whole camp came into view from the mound where he kept guard, and whereon the Great King's tent was pitched—a camp of many sleeping thousands, ranged in warlike order under a hundred banners drooping heavily in the still clear air. Suddenly the warrior started from his listless attitude into life and action; for a light step was approaching, and a figure advanced to the tufted spears that denoted the abode of royalty.

"Stand!" he exclaimed in threatening accents, advancing his shield and raising the javelin to strike. "Nay, pass, Sethos," he added with a scornful laugh. "I have no orders to stop the king's cup-bearer; but you are on foot betimes this morning, though you wot well the old lion stirs not before break of day."

Sethos patted the wine-skin under his arm—a homely vessel enough, though its contents were to be poured into a jewelled cup.

"The old lion laps ever at sunrise," said he; "and the hunter who brings him to drink need not fear to enter his lair."

"Fear!" repeated the other with an accent of contempt. "He who deals with lions must forget the meaning of the word. 'Tis thus, man, they are trapped and tamed."

"Of a truth," answered Sethos, "I once believed that in all the hosts of Assyria or of Egypt was to be found no frown so dark as gathers on the brows of the Great King when he is angered. By the beard of Ashur, Sargon, I have seen a fiercer look of late on the face of one who used to be ready with smile and wine-cup as with bow and spear; and it comes from under the helmet, my friend, that keeps *your* head."

"Have I not cause?" muttered the other, speaking below his breath in the quick concentrated accents of intense feeling. "When the host marches into Babylon, and the women come out with song and timbrel to welcome the conquerors; when each man makes his boast, showing his treasure, his spoil, and the captives of his bow and spear; when my lord the king rewards his servants, giving gifts—to this a dress of honour, to that a beautiful slave, to another a talent of gold and spoil of household stuff—what shall be done for Sargon, the king's shield-bearer, returning childless and bereaved by the king's own hand? Boy, it is well I hold not your place. I might be tempted to mix that in the

cup which should cause Ninus to pour out his next drink-offering amongst a host of heaven in whom he professes to have no belief."

"Dangerous words," answered Sethos, "and empty as they are rash. Why, man, you yourself cover him in battle with his shield. It is but lowering your arm a cubit, and the king's life is in your hand."

"I could not do it," said Sargon, drawing himself proudly up. "It shall never be said that the great Assyrian fell to point of Egyptian arrow, or gash of Bactrian steel. Nay; though the fire on Sargon's hearth may be quenched, his name extinct, let Ninus fulfil his destiny, and sit amongst the gods like his forefathers. It may be they are waiting for him even now. Listen, Sethos; he calls from his tent. Hie thee into the lion's den, and pour him out such a morning's draught as shall keep him fasting from blood at least till noon."

Sethos — a handsome, light-hearted youth, who as the king's cup-bearer enjoyed many privileges and immunities, of which he availed himself to the utmost—passed swiftly between the tufted spears, and with a low prostration raised its curtain, to enter the tent of the oldest and mightiest warrior in the world.

Ninus, half risen from his couch, ruder and simpler than that of any captain in his host, stretched his long gaunt arm with impatience for the wine he so craved, to replenish the exhausted energies and wasting powers of extreme old age. The Great King's face was pale and sunken; his eyes, deep in their sockets, were dull and dim; while his thin scattered locks, shaggy brows, and long flowing beard had turned white as snow. Nevertheless, the wreck of that mighty frame, like some hoary fortress crumbling and tottering into ruin, still showed the remnant of such grand proportions, such fabulous strength as was allotted to the men of olden time, when earth was new and nature inexhaustible. Yet was it whispered through the host, that as their fiercest champion would have seemed a mere child by the side of their king in his prime, so was Ninus but as a babe compared with great Nimrod, his ancestor, the god of their idolatry, and mighty founder of their race.

Sethos tendered the wine-cup as in duty bound, then stood with hands crossed before him, and looks bent lowly on the earth. The king drained his morning draught to the dregs; and for a moment there rose a faint flush on the ashen features, a lurid glow in the wan weary eyes—but only

to fade as quickly; and it was a sadly tremulous hand, though so broad and sinewy, that grasped his wine-cup; while the deep voice came very hoarse and broken in which he asked Sethos—

"Who waits outside? Is it near sunrise?"

"Sargon, the royal shield-bearer," was the answer, "has been on guard since cock-crow; and Shamash, Prince of Light, will doubtless show himself above the horizon so soon as my lord the king appears at the door of his tent."

Ninus bent his shaggy brows in displeasure on the volubility of his servant.

"Halt!" said he. "Rein in thy tongue, lest the dogs have their share of it without the camp. Fill yet again; and let me hear no more of this endless jargon about the gods."

It was death to laugh in the king's presence; but Sethos, replenishing the goblet to its brim, did not repress a smile. The old warrior's second draught seemed somewhat to renew his strength.

"Reach me that gown," said he—"the heavy one; and the girdle yonder. Fool! that in which hangs the sword—my good old sword! Ha! if Baal and Ashtaroth had done for me but one half the service of horse and weapon, they might take their share of the spoil, and welcome. By the belt of Nimrod, they shall not have one shekel more than a tenth this time! Thirteen gods, by my beard, and every god a thousand priests! Why, it is enough to ruin the richest king that ever built treasure-house. I must reduce them. I will about it at once, when the people are busy with the triumph. I wonder what she will say — my beautiful! I angered her long ago, when I refused to worship Satan up yonder in the mountains. I would be loath to anger her again, though I will worship nothing but the eyes that are watching fondly for my return."

Old, exhausted, weary as he was, there came a gentle look over his grim war-worn face while he thought of the woman he loved so fondly, whom it had cost him so much of crime and cruelty to possess. But the passion of acquisition, almost inseparable from age, was strong in the king's heart; and it chafed him to think the votaries of Baal should so largely share in the fruits of this his last and most successful expedition beyond the Nile.

Sethos, standing before him in the prescribed attitude of respect, marked every shade of his lord's countenance, rawing his own conclusions, and preserving his usual air of mperturbable good-humour and self-conceit.

The early flush of sunrise now stole under the hangings of the tent, crimsoning the cup-bearer's feet where he stood, so that his sandals looked as if they had been dipped in blood.

"Bid them sound trumpets," said the king. "Go tell Arbaces that the vanguard must set themselves in array at once. Where is Ninyas? He should have been waiting before his father's tent ere now. Wine, sloth, and pleasure—he loves them all too well. Yet the boy drew a good bow in his first battle, and rode through Pharaoh's horsemen, dealing about him like Nimrod himself. Go, bring him hither; and, Sethos, as you pass through the camp, order the captain of the night to call in the watches. So soon as the camels are loaded I shall march."

A warrior to the very marrow, Ninus loved such minute details as the marshalling of a vanguard, or the ordering of an encampment, better than all the pomp of royalty; and felt more at ease in steel harness, on the back of a good steed, than seated in purple and gold, with the royal parasol overhead, the royal sceptre in hand, an object of worship to adoring crowds in ancient Nineveh, or even great Babylon itself. His son Ninyas, on the contrary, though scarcely yet verging on manhood, was already steeped in sensuality, and a slave to that reckless indulgence of the appetites which so soon degenerates from pleasure into vice. His grim father perhaps would have been less patient of excesses and outbreaks in camp and city but for the lad's exceeding beauty and likeness to his mother, Semiramis, whose rare and womanly graces were reproduced with startling fidelity in those delicate boyish features, that lithe symmetry of form.

Sethos was a prime favourite with the prince, who approached his father's tent, leaning on the cup-bearer's shoulder, in respectful haste, denoted by his flushed face and disordered apparel. Though careless of the displeasure with which Ninus visited such unwarlike negligence, as he was of everything save the folly of the moment, he had put on neither harness nor head-piece, had neither taken a spear in his hand nor girt a sword upon his thigh.

The old king's shaggy brows lowered till they almost hid his dull stern eyes.

"What maiden is this," said he, "who comes thus unveiled into the camp of warriors? Go, take needle in hand, and busy them with cunning embroidery if those unmanly fingers be too dainty to bear the weight of heavier steel."

It was death to laugh in the king's presence, death to assume any other than the prescribed attitude with bowed head and crossed hands; nevertheless a merry peal rang through the tent, the boy tossed the king's goblet in the air, and caught it again, while his fresh young voice answered lightly—

"There is a season for all things, father, and I like fighting at the proper time as well as old Nimrod himself. But this is a day of victory and rejoicing. I begin it with a drink-offering to my lord the king."

He held the cup to Sethos while he spoke, laughing to see how little of the generous fluid was left in the wine-skin. His mirth was contagious, and the old lion smiled a grim smile while he laid his large wrinkled hand on the lad's shoulder, with a kindly gesture that was in itself a caress.

"Begone with you!" said he, "and if proven harness be too heavy for those young bones, at least take bow and spear in hand. It was thus your mother came riding into camp the first time I ever saw those arched brows of hers. You have her fair face, lad, and something of her proud spirit and wilful heart."

He looked after the boy sadly and with a wistful shake of his head; but just then a trumpet sounded, and the old warrior's eye gleamed, his features assumed their usual fierce and even savage expression, while he summoned his armour-bearer to rivet harness on his back, and the captains of his host to take their short stern orders for the day.

And now the whole camp was astir. Tents were struck and camels loaded with a rapidity only acquired by the daily repetition of such duties under the eye of discipline and in presence of an enemy. Ere long, where horses and beasts of burden had been loosely picketed, or wandering half tethered amongst bundles of unbound forage, between the lines of dusky weather-stained tents—where spears had been piled in sheaves, amongst cooking utensils and drinking vessels—where bow and arrow, sword and shield, helm and habergeon, had been tossed indiscriminately on war-chariots, horse furniture, or scattered heaps of spoil—where the movable city had seemed but a confused and disorganised mass, was fairly marshalled the flower of an Assyrian army, perfect in formation, splendid in equipment, and no less formidable, thus disposed in its smooth motionless concentration, like a snake prepared to strike, than when drawn out in winding shining lines to encircle and annihilate its foe. Even the captives had their allotted station, and with the spoil were

disposed in mathematical regularity, to be guarded by a chosen band of spears. These prisoners were of two kinds, separate and distinct in every detail of feature, form, and bearing. The darker portion, some of whom were so swarthy that their colour looked like bronze, scowled with peculiar hatred on their conquerors, and, as it seemed, with the more reason that several bore such wounds and injuries as showed they had fought hard before they were taken alive, while a whiter-skinned and better-favoured race, with flowing beards, high features, and stately bearing, who kept entirely apart and to themselves, seemed to accept the proceedings of their captors in the forbearance of conscious superiority, not without a certain sympathy, as of those who have interests and traditions in common with their masters. The admiration of all, however, was compelled by the imposing appearance of those war-chariots and horsemen that formed the strength and pride of an Assyrian army.

As the old king, tottering somewhat under the weight of his harness, appeared at the door of his tent, the entire host was set in motion—bowmen and slingers in front, followed by a body of horsemen glittering in scarlet and gold, raising clouds of dust, while their trumpets sounded above the neigh and trample of those horses of the desert that knew neither fatigue nor fear; then, with stately even tread, marched a dark serried column of spears, bearded, curled, and stalwart warriors, every man with shield on arm, sword on thigh, and lance in hand; next, the war-chariots, thousands in number, with a roll like distant thunder, as they came on in a solid mass of moving iron, tipped with steel. After these a few priests of Baal, weary and dejected, walking with but little assumption of sacred dignity, bore the image of a bull and a few other idols, small and portable, but formed of molten gold. These hurried on, as if they feared to be ridden down by the king's body-guard who succeeded them, picked champions, every one of whom must have slain an enemy outright with his own hand, mounted on white steeds, and glistening with shields and helmets of gold. In their rear rode Arbaces, the captain of the host, and immediately behind him came the chariot and led horse of the monarch himself. As these reached the mound on which the royal tent was pitched, the whole force halted, and a shiver of steel ran like the ripple of a wave along their ranks, while every man brandished his weapon over his head, and shouted the name of the Great King.

Ninus stood unmoved, though for an instant the wrinkles

seemed less furrowed on his brow. They gathered, however, deeper than ever, when his quick eye caught sight of Ninyas reclining in his chariot, with his favourite Sethos beside him, and a cup of wine half emptied in his hand.

The king's own chariot was in waiting; but he caused it to pass on, and bade them bring his war-horse, a fiery animal, that came up curveting and champing at its bit. Sargon, with the same scowl that had never left his face, went down on hands and knees for his lord to mount with greater advantage from off his back, and Ninus, settling himself in the saddle, while the war-horse plunged with a force that would have unseated many a younger rider, looked his son fixedly in the face, observing in a tone of marked reproach—

"Couches for women! chariots for eunuchs! May you never learn to your cost, boy, that his good horse is the only secure throne for an Assyrian king!"

Then he signed with his hand, and while trumpets rang out, and warriors recovered their weapons, a globe of crystal, emblematic of the sun, and suspended above the royal tent, was illumined by a priest with sacred fire. As it flashed and kindled, the whole army set itself in motion, and the King of Nations was once more on the march towards his last triumph, after his last campaign.

CHAPTER VIII

THE LUST OF THE EYE

BABYLON the Great had pranked herself out in holiday attire, like some loyal and splendid dame arrayed to welcome her lord. From the gates of brass in her southern wall to the temple of Baal towering in her centre, squares, streets, and terraces were hung with scarlet, blazing with gold, and strewed knee-deep in flowers. Her population were shouting by tens of thousands on either bank of the Euphrates, which ran through the heart of the city, while even the broad river was dotted with boats of every shape and colour, fantastic, gaudy, and beautiful as the exotics on the tanks of those paradises or gardens which formed her distinguishing characteristic and her pride. Myriads of women waved their veils and scarfs from roof and balcony in endless perspective, while countless children added a shriller echo to every cry of welcome as it rose.

It was remarkable, however, that, contrary to custom on similar occasions, none of the weaker sex were to be seen in the streets. Such had been the decree of the Great Queen; a decree enforced by the presence of so strong an array of warriors as denoted the mighty resources of an empire, which could thus furnish a formidable army at home to receive an army of comrades returning from the frontier.

Besides these champions of bow and spear, masses of white-robed priests occupied the porches of every temple and every open space dedicated to sacrifice throughout the city; while others, chosen from the servants of Baal, and therefore under the immediate influence of Assarac, were scattered through the crowd, conspicuous amongst the gay dresses and glittering arms of their countrymen by their linen garment and the lotus-flowers in their hands. Of these, Beladon seemed the busiest and most voluble, gliding from group to group with plausible words and impressive gestures, which nevertheless left on his listeners a nameless sense of dissatis-

faction in the pageant, the victory, and general results of the Egyptian campaign.

Amongst the warriors perhaps this discontent was most apparent, amounting indeed to a sentiment of insubordination, which lost nothing in strength and bitterness from the observations of the priest.

"A feeble war," said he, addressing himself to the captain of a band of spearmen who occupied one of the brazen gates —"a distant country and a doubtful success. Few captives, I have heard, little spoil, and the frontier remains where it was."

"Not much to boast in the way of fighting," answered the other, a stalwart warrior curled and bearded to the eyes. "Look at the vanguard passing even now. Scarcely a dinted shield or a torn garment in their ranks; every bowman with a whole skin and a quiver full of arrows at his back. It was not thus we marched in from Bactria, when I myself could count three scars on my breast, and one on my face that you may see there even now; ay! and bore on my spear the head of a giant whom I slew in sight of both armies with my own hand. Ninus laughed, and swore I hewed at him like a wood-cutter at a broad-leafed oak in the northern hills. I wonder if he will remember me to-day."

"The Great King hath forgotten many a stout blow and faithful service since then," answered Beladon. "The lion grows old now, his teeth are gone, and his claws worn down. Ere long he will take his seat amongst the Thirteen Gods, my friend, and Ninyas, his son, will reign in his stead."

"He is a leader of promise, I have heard," said the other, "who can set the battle in array; ay, and strike hard in the fore-front too, despite his slender body and winsome woman's face."

"Winsome indeed," replied Beladon, pointing upward to where the queen sat in state on the wall amidst her people. "Is he not his mother's son? and has he not inherited her very eyes and smile?"

"She would make the noblest leader of the three," swore the captain of spears. "By the serpent of Ashtaroth, she has more skill of warfare than the Great King himself; and I have seen the Bactrians lay down their arms and surrender without a blow, when she drove her war-horse into their ranks. You are a priest, and priests are learned in such matters. Have you never heard that she is something more than woman?"

"The gods will take her to dwell with them in their own

good time," answered Beladon gravely, but smothering a smile as he reflected on sundry feminine weaknesses and caprices of the Great Queen, freely discussed by the priests of the inner circle in the temple of Baal. "More than woman," he muttered, moving away to another group of spectators —"more than woman in cunning, more than man in foresight, more than the lion in courage, more than a goddess in beauty! The day must come when she will rule the world! Assarac is her chief adviser—Beladon is high in the counsels of Assarac—and so, what matters a gash or so before an altar, a little reserve amongst the people, compared with the prospect that opens before us, if only we were rid of this fierce old unbeliever, who fears neither gods above nor men below?"

Then he moved a few paces on, and bade a listener mark how the queen had turned the course of a stream out of her gardens round the royal palace to fill the fountains of the city, wondering in the same breath how Ninus would relish the alteration—Ninus, who a few years back had levelled walls, streets, and temples to enlarge the borders of a paradise for his game. This observation having won sufficient attention from the crowd, he proceeded to discuss the value of provisions, a subject of interest to all, reminding them that grain had been strangely cheap during the king's absence from his dominions, and marvelling why millet should have gone up in price as the conquering army advanced nearer and nearer home. Were they better or worse for the Great King's presence, he wanted to know; had they been athirst or an hungered while Ninus was far away making war on the frontier; and why was it that now, on the day of his return in triumph, they began to feel scarcity and to be sparing of the children's bread? Men looked blankly in each other's faces, and shook their heads for a reply; but such seed is never sown on barren ground, and it dawned on many minds that their city, which after all was not of his own founding, but his queen's, would have been none the worse had the Great King never come back from the war at all.

A hundred priests prating to the same effect in a hundred quarters produced no contemptible result. Discontent soon grew to disloyalty, and men who at daybreak would have asked no better than to fling themselves in adoration under the king's chariot-wheels were now prepared to receive him in sullen displeasure, and, as far as they dared, with outward demonstrations of ill-will. Yet, like clouds before the northern breeze, all these symptoms of disaffection were

swept away by the first glitter of spears in the desert, the first trumpet-blast without the walls giving notice of his approach—to return, when the triumph and the pageant should be over, when the shouting and the excitement should have died away.

There was one, however, who watched the alternations of temper in the multitude as a steersman in shoal water watches the ebb and flow of the tide. Assarac's keen intellect penetrated the wavering feelings of the people, while his daring ambition aimed even at the overthrow of a dynasty for the gratification of its pride. He had long dreaded the return of Ninus as a check to his own power over the populace and paramount influence with the queen. The old lion loved neither priests nor priestcraft, and would have had small scruple in putting all the servants of Baal to the sword, if he suspected them of treachery or revolt. Had the army marched back from Egypt weakened and disorganised by the fatigues of its campaign; had the numerous force within the walls shown stronger symptoms of impatience and discontent; in short, had his materials seemed but inflammable enough to take fire at a moment's notice, Assarac would not have hesitated that one moment in applying a torch to set the whole Assyrian empire in a blaze.

But the priest, though swift to strike his blow, was also patient to bide his time. The great conqueror's army marched home as it had marched out, strong in numbers, in courage, in supplies—flushed moreover with an easy victory and a sufficiency of spoil. Warlike enthusiasm is of all excitement the most catching, and the hosts within the city were fain to greet their brethren-in-arms with at least the semblance of cordiality and goodwill. Not thus on the day of his triumph was the old lion to be taken in the toils. Assarac, in his place of honour as high-priest, standing near the queen, watched every turn of her countenance, and bethought him that the stars in their courses afforded no such difficult page to read as the text of a woman's heart.

Semiramis was attired with a magnificence that, enhancing her own unrivalled beauty, seemed to envelop her in splendour more than human. When she raised her veil to look down on the crowd, an awe came over the people, so that they forbore even to shout. It seemed as if Ashtaroth, Queen of Heaven, had descended in their midst; but a single voice finding vent at last, such a pent-up burst of cheers rose to the sky, that her fair face turned a shade paler, and to him

who was scanning it with eager gaze of curiosity and admiration, it seemed as if a moisture rose in her deep dark eyes.

The shouts of the people were caught up again and again. Clad in a robe of golden tissue, crowned with a diadem of rubies and diamonds set in gold, wearing the star-shaped ornaments round her neck that denoted her divine origin, and on her breast the most precious jewel in the empire, representing a cock and a crescent moon, emblems of that homage to the Evil Principle which she had herself inculcated on the nation; wrapped besides in the halo of her own surpassing beauty, it was scarce possible to believe she was only a woman after all, of the same mould, the same nature, the same passions, with the drudges they had left pounding corn and drawing water at home. From gilded warrior to naked slave, from the captain in his chariot to the leper at the wayside, not a man, as he looked on that lovely face, but would have felt death cheaply purchased by a kind word or a smile. And these were lavished on one who was asked to encounter no danger—scarcely to perform an act of homage in return.

Sarchedon, flushed, dazzled, bewildered by the position, found himself installed at her right hand, chief officer and prime favourite, placed there ostensibly as bearer from the camp of the Great King's signet; in reality, something whispered to his astonished senses, because he had pleased the eye and taken captive the fancy of the queen. Many a stolen look had he intercepted that could but be interpreted as of high favour and approval. Once she fixed her eyes on the amulet, which, in ignorance of its ownership, he wore openly round his neck, and seemed about to speak, but checked herself, sighing languidly, and turning with impatience to Assarac; while she questioned him about the details of the pageant, wondering why the vanguard, already marching in, should be thus far in advance of the main body and the Great King. "Was the army so encumbered with spoil? Had they so many captives? Were there beautiful women among them? She had heard much concerning the daughters of the South—Sarchedon could tell them—was it true the women of Egypt were so dangerously fair?"

Once more she bent her eyes on the young warrior, and was not displeased to mark the colour deepen on his cheek, while bowing low he answered, with his looks averted from her face—

"I thought so till I returned to Babylon from the host.

But a man who has once seen the glitter of a diamond is blind thenceforth to the lustre of meaner gems."

"Your eyes must have been strangely dazzled," replied Semiramis with exceeding graciousness; "and the diamond that so bewildered you—was it rough from the mine, or cut and set in gold? Did it sparkle in the zone of a maiden, or in the diadem of a"— She stopped short with a faint laugh, adding, in a more reserved tone, "She was no Egyptian, then, but one of our own people, whose beauty thus reached the heart at which Pharaoh's bowmen have been aiming in vain? Shall I press him to name this victorious archer? Kalmim, do you plead guilty? Is it you? or you? or you?"

She looked round amongst her women while she spoke, and one after another, trying hard to blush, bowed her modest disclaimer with glances of admiration, not unmarked by the queen, at the warrior's handsome face and figure, set off by the splendid armour and apparel in which he stood. Even Semiramis, proud, conquering, almost omnipotent, liked him none the worse that it was obvious the other women would have liked him too, if they dared. But Assarac, ever watchful, ever jealous of his own interests, which centred in the dignity of the Great Queen, now interposed.

"The land of Shinar has been the land of beauty ever since the sons of heaven came down to woo her daughters on the mountains beyond the two rivers," said the priest. "Even before the days of the Great Queen, has not Ashtaroth the beautiful reigned ever goddess of the Assyrians? Ashtaroth, with her golden crown, enrobed in streams of light!"

"Ashtaroth trampling the lion beneath her feet!" added Semiramis, with a curl on her lip and a dangerous glitter in her eyes.

"Ashtaroth with the serpent in her hand," retorted Assarac, lowering his voice to a meaning whisper. "The emblem of cunning, stratagem, and true wisdom. Think not it is her starlike beauty, her golden crown, her lustrous robes, that dominate the world. No; it is the counsel of the serpent she carries in her hand!"

The queen flung up her head. "I require no counsels," said she, "from priest or serpent. When I spear the wild bull, I ride my horse freely against his front. When I shoot the lion, I aim mine arrow straight at his heart. Warriors bolder than the wild bull, fiercer than the lion, must needs go down before the weapons of Semiramis!"

It had been an ungraceful boast, but for the sweet smile,

"So looked she when she rode the Lion down"

the soft glance, that accompanied her words, causing them to convey a loving invitation rather than a warlike defiance.

Sarchedon's heart was thrilling and his brain burning. The sweet intoxication of vanity possessed the one, the fiery spark of ambition kindled in the other. He muttered low, that "to be slain and trampled under foot by the Great Queen was a nobler lot than to drive a war-chariot over prostrate nations," and was raising his eyes to learn how the humility of such an avowal would be received, when his face turned pale, and he started like a man who leaps to his feet at the approach of danger. Not half a bowshot off, looking fixedly towards him, was the gentle troubled face of Ishtar, on the terrace of her father's palace, watching for the chief captain's return.

The queen did not fail to detect his agitation and its cause. Her eyes flashed, her delicate mouth shut close on the instant as if with a clasp, her features set themselves like a mask, a beautiful mask, but of the hardest steel. So looked she when she rode the lion down and pierced him to the heart; so looked she when she urged her chariot through the ranks of an enemy, over heaps of slain; so looked she when she administered justice from the Great King's tribunal, and turned pitiless from a suppliant pleading hard for life. The glance she shot at the daughter of Arbaces was that of an unhooded falcon eyeing the gazelle upon the plains. And at the same moment glances, pleading, passionate, longing, as of that same gazelle when she nears the desert spring, were directed towards Ishtar from a gorgeous chariot passing slowly in pompous march of triumph through the Brazen Gate, while veils were waved, steel brandished, and the acclamations of ten thousand voices rose higher and higher; for in that chariot stood their future king, the young Ninyas, a living reflection of his mother, bright, delicate, and beautiful as the queen herself.

She marked her son's admiration of the pale fair girl; she marked Sarchedon's uneasiness; but whatever thoughts were busy in her royal and lovely head, she looked abroad into the desert and held her peace.

CHAPTER IX

THE PRIDE OF LIFE

AS the glittering procession defiled in proud array through the gates of that imperial city, Babylon might well be proud of her children. The most warlike nation on earth had assembled to greet the flower of its army returning from conquest; and the warriors of the old king bore themselves like men who are conscious they deserve the meed of triumph accorded to their fellows. Each black-browed spearman, so bold of feature, so open-eyed, so curled and bearded, stalwart of limb and stately of gesture, marched with haughty step and head erect, as though he felt himself the picked and chosen champion of a host. Archers and slingers assumed the staid dignity of veteran captains, while the very horses that drew the war-chariots champed, snorted, and swelled their crests as if they too were conscious of the reputation it behoved them to uphold.

Far as stretched the triumph—so far indeed that its van had already reached the temple of Baal, while its rearguard was yet below the sky-line of the desert—every link in that chain of victory afforded some object of interest, admiration, or pride to the spectators. These were the bows that had been bent to such purpose in their first pitched battle with the ancient enemy, when Egypt was worsted and driven back upon the Nile. Those strong and stately spearmen, so bronzed, so scarred, so splendid in dress and armour, were the very warriors who had withstood the fury of all Pharaoh's chariots and horsemen, nor yielded one cubit of ground, though sore out-numbered and beset, while they covered the Great King's passage of that famous river. Close in their rear, with clang of trumpet, clash of steel, and ring of bridle, came trampling four abreast the famous horsemen of Assyria;

and men told each other, with kindling eyes and eager gestures, how the steeds that drank from the Tigris and the Euphrates had charged to the gates of Memphis and been stabled in the temples of the Stork.

Next, with horses gorgeously caparisoned, trapped, plumed, and stepping daintily under the rein, rolled on the terrible war-chariots of iron, that, with their scythes of steel, mowed down the ranks of an enemy in broad swathes of slaughter where they passed. Each car, besides its charioteer, held a heavily armed warrior under shield, with bow and arrows, sword and spear; three horses plunged abreast, two of which were harnessed to the chariot, while a third, linked only with its fellows to the bridle, was driven alongside in readiness to replace a maimed or fallen steed. This formidable array, which struck with awe even the accustomed senses of the bystanders, was compared by them to the chest and body of the army, while the horsemen represented its limbs and feet.

Immediately in rear of that moving mass of metal rode the captain of the host, less distinguished for splendour of array than personal dignity of bearing, and such a noble face as must have been beautiful in youth. To please his fierce old master, he followed the example of Ninus, and abandoned his chariot for the back of so goodly a steed as could only have been bred in the plain between the rivers. If a thousand acclamations rent the air while this stately veteran came galloping on, managing his war-horse with all the grace and pliancy of youth, they were increased tenfold when he drew rein beneath the terrace where stood Ishtar and her maidens, halting for a moment, while he looked fondly upward at his daughter and his home. With the gesture of a child, she stretched out her arms towards him, as if she would fain have leaped down into his embrace. Sarchedon, looking on her from the wall, was but one of many thousands who felt her innocent beauty thrill to his very heart. Nevertheless, Assarac, narrowly watching Semiramis, observed her cheek turn a shade paler, while the hard pitiless expression came back to the queen's unrivalled face.

Arbaces made no long delay. Waving his hand towards his daughter, and glancing proudly round on his applauding countrymen, he paced slowly on, while a whisper ran through the crowd—

"Stand close—here they come! Welcome to the golden helmets! Honour to the guards of the Great King!"

Two by two, mounted on white horses with scarlet

trappings, arrayed in silks of white and scarlet, with shields and helmets of burnished gold, came flashing on this picked and chosen body—every man of whom, selected for strength and beauty, must also have distinguished himself by an attested act of daring in the field. In their centre floated their standard, likewise of scarlet, and on its folds was embroidered in gold the figure of Merodach, god of war, standing on a bull with a drawn bow in his hand. The arms of these champions were bare to the elbow, their legs to the knee; but their persons were otherwise defended by close scale-armour, thickly inlaid with gold; precious jewels studded the belt and pommel of each man's sword, and the shaft of his spear; the fringes of their gowns were inordinately long, their beards and hair elaborately curled and perfumed. It was evident that these guards of royalty esteemed themselves no less ornaments than champions of the Assyrian host.

Sarchedon's eyes flashed, and his cheek glowed with pleasure while they passed. He was proud to think that these were his own special comrades and brethren-in-arms; that it was from their glittering ranks he had been detached with the royal signet and tidings of the Great King's return. The queen marked his enthusiasm; and, bending kindly towards him, demanded in a soft voice, scarce above a whisper—

"Who are these, Sarchedon? To my eye they seem the goodliest and best-favoured men in the armies of Assyria."

"They are my comrades," he answered proudly; "the guards of the Great King: the meanest of us holds himself equal to a leader of ten thousand. Arbaces Tartan[1] is our captain, as he is captain of the host."

"And Sarchedon would look nobly at their head," she answered, with one of her bewildering smiles. "It may come to pass yet for him who knows when to strike and when to forbear. Hush! there are higher destinies written in the stars than the posting of a few tinselled spearmen to watch the slumbers of a king!"

He was equal to the occasion. O heart of man! so strong and bold when beset by danger or privation, so weak and untenable when assailed on the side of vanity! He replied in a low and trembling voice, "It is honour enough for me. Yet is there one post I would rather hold—one watch I would give my life to keep, if only for a day!"

"You shall not pay so dear a price!" she answered gently. "Take a lesson from the amulet on your own breast. See how

[1] Tartan, the general in command.

that loving bird follows the arrow's flight. So long as her career is upward, the shaft can never pierce her heart. 'Tis a fair and precious jewel—let no temptation lead you to part from it. I will examine it more closely hereafter."

"It is my queen's!" he exclaimed. "As is my life, and all I have."

"Keep it till I require it of you," was the answer. "And now tell me, Sarchedon, amongst these goodly warriors, whom think you the fairest and the comeliest?"

"There are none in all the host to be compared with him now passing beneath us in his chariot," said Sarchedon boldly. "None other face of man or woman half so fair—but one!"

Such words conveyed no mental reservation—though his own heart told him he had overshot the truth. But punishment for his duplicity followed quickly on the offence. Another of those rare smiles stole over the queen's face, as the acclamations of the multitude rose higher than before to greet him who must hereafter be their king; and Ninyas, reclining in his chariot, accepted with indolent good-humour that loud and boisterous welcome. His shield and spear were laid aside—his bow and quiver hung at the back of the chariot. On his head, from which the dark curls were combed back so daintily, he wore no helmet of defence—only a light linen tiara bound by a circlet of gold. Robes of violet silk floated loosely round his exquisite shape and womanly roundness of limb, while he carried a jewelled drinking-cup, long since emptied, in his hand. It was the attire—the attitude—the appearance of a votary of pleasure hastening to the banquet, rather than of a tried warrior returning from the field. Nevertheless, it may be that a character for prowess, cheaply earned enough by a king's son in battle, lost nothing of its value among the thoughtless crowd, for an affectation of effeminacy, only excusable in one of such youth, beauty, and reputed valour. The queen, looking down on him well-pleased, could not refrain from exclaiming—

"My son is indeed comely! Yet is it the comeliness of a woman rather than a man."

"There is but one woman on earth more fair," whispered Assarac in her ear. "Nevertheless were she down yonder in male attire on a war-chariot, and he sitting amongst us here in the royal robes of a queen, I doubt if the change would be suspected by one of all that countless multitude now gazing in admiration on both."

She started, not expecting to receive her answer from the priest, and bent her brows in deep thought, mingled with dis-

pleasure, as she observed the uneasiness of Sarchedon, eagerly watching certain movements going on below. Guiding the horses, by the side of Ninyas, sat Sethos, the king's cup-bearer, who being in high favour with his young lord usually accompanied him in his chariot, both to battle and to the chase. Perhaps not entirely without a purpose, he drew rein immediately under the terrace where stood Ishtar and her maidens, at the instant when a posy of flowers, projected innocently enough by the damsel herself, came whirling down at the feet of her future king. Ninyas looked up quickly; and even in that moment of vexation Sarchedon could not but remark the winning smile, that, brightening all his face, enhanced her son's extraordinary resemblance to Semiramis.

The young prince lifted the flowers and put them to his lips with a graceful salutation. Then he bent his head to Sethos, who, taking the cup from his lord's hand, flung it deftly upward so as to light on the terrace within a cubit of where the damsel stood.

"Keep it for the sake of Ninyas," called out the giver, as he bowed his head once more; whispering in the ear of Sethos, while the chariot moved slowly on, "That comely maiden, pale and tender like a lily in a paradise, is better worth the taking than all the beauty of Egypt, captives of our bow and spear."

"And my lord has won her with an empty cup," answered laughing Sethos. "When he flings aside the maiden, like the goblet, may I be there to catch her ere she falls!"

Though the populace applauded loudly, as it was natural they should applaud such an action of mingled gallantry, condescension, and insolence, a shudder crept over Ishtar from head to heel, and she moved the skirt of her garment to avoid touching that gift of a future monarch, as if it had been some noxious reptile in her path. Semiramis did not fail to note how the daughter of Arbaces shot more than one imploring glance at Sarchedon, that seemed to deprecate a jealousy of which she was aware, while conscious of not being answerable for its cause. It was perhaps more in character with the spite of a woman than the dignity of a queen that she should have leant towards the young warrior, and addressed him with such marked demonstrations of favour as could not fail to be observed by Ishtar, whose perceptions and feelings were now strung to their highest pitch. She might even have shown him greater condescension than was either royal or prudent, but for the renewed intervention of

Assarac, who once more took possession of her ear, speaking so as to be heard by the queen alone.

"My directions have been carried out," he whispered, "and of every hundred men assembled in the streets, ten are warriors and four are priests. The people admire, but partake not in the triumph; they shout, but their hearts go forth less freely than their voices. There is discontent abroad, and even displeasure, relating to this conquest of my lord the king. The men of war who have gone down with him to battle are like to be ill-satisfied with their share of spoil. Those who have remained within the walls already jeer and point the finger at the unhacked armour and whole skins of their returning comrades. Our own followers, servants of Baal and prophets of the grove, whisper strange auguries, and the stars themselves declare that Ninus is destined ere long to take his place among the gods. Caution, Great Queen! caution! I must away on the instant, to be in readiness at the head of a thousand priests who will receive the king on the steps before the temple. He loves not such receptions, and holds but little with offerings and sacrifices to the gods; nevertheless even Ninus must not, *dare* not, beard the whole host of heaven in this their very stronghold. He will make the ceremony short and simple as he can, however, and every priest that ever laid knife to his own flesh before an altar will feel outraged and aggrieved. You have the Great King's signet. Keep it safely. That jewelled toy is worth ten thousand chariots of iron and as many horsemen. Behold, the guards have now passed on. See what a handful of priests are pacing with his chariot—an empty chariot, too; and look how few in number and scant in metal are the molten gods that go before him to battle. He comes. I say again,—caution, Great Queen! caution! and for a space forbear!"

Pointing his warning with an expressive glance towards Sarchedon, Assarac bowed reverently and withdrew.

Semiramis turned a shade paler, and for one moment a shudder seemed to creep from her brow even to her feet. The next she stood forth to mark her lord's approach, erect and beautiful, the stateliest queen, as she was the fairest woman, in the world.

Immediately in rear of the royal standard passed on the war-chariot of the Great King, containing his charioteer and shield-bearer. Sargon's lowering brow was black as night, and to the vociferous greetings of his countrymen he returned but a silent scowl. In the brief space that had elapsed since

the cruel slaughter of his son, the man's nature seemed wholly changed. His very beard, formerly so black and glossy, was streaked with grey, and the dark eyes, now dull and downcast, glowed with lurid light as though from some inner fire. Few, however, remarked this alteration in the aspect of the shield-bearer; for with the first glimpse of Ninus, shouts of jubilee rose once more from the people, and in that moment of enthusiasm, assembled Babylon could not have afforded a fuller, fairer welcome to mighty Nimrod himself.

The Great King came on at a foot's-pace, reining his steed with that craft of practised horsemanship which outlasts failing sight, lost activity, and bodily powers impaired by age. His large gaunt frame, though bowed and tottering, swayed easily to every motion of his steed; his broad, loose hands, though numbed and stiff, closed with unimpaired skill on spear and bridle; while ever and anon, with some vociferous cheer or stirring trumpet-call, the drooping head went up, the dim eye sparkled, and for a space in which bow might have been drawn or sword-blow stricken, Ninus looked again the champion warrior of the world.

The king had abstained from all outward pomp of attire or panoply; he wore neither diadem nor tiara, but a steel helmet, much dinted and battered, guarded his brow. Save for the lion's head embossed in its centre, his shield was the plainest, as it was the most defaced, that passed into Babylon that day; while neither his horse's trappings nor his own accoutrements could compare in splendour with those of his guards who preceded him on the march. But his sword was a span longer, his spear some shekels heavier, than any other in the whole Assyrian host, and none, looking on that renowned conqueror, so formidable even in decay, but would have recognised him for the bravest and mightiest fighter of his time. Slowly, sternly he came on, receiving the homage and acclamations of his people with a royal indifference not far removed from scorn. The press of chariots, the clash of steel, all the wild tumult and fierce music of battle, could scarcely now call the light to his eye, the colour to his visage. What was a mere peaceful triumph but an unmeaning pageant, a protracted and somewhat wearisome dream? His grim old features sank and lowered till it seemed to the nearer bystanders that they were looking on a corpse in mail.

But once the Great King's face brightened, the blood rushed redly to his cheek, and his strong hand shook so on the bridle, that his good horse, accepting the signal, bounded freely in the air. Then he turned ghastly pale, drawing his

breath hard, and trembling like a maiden or a child. Beaming down on him from the wall with her own bright smile, he saw the face that had haunted him in those long night-watches for many a weary month—the face that, of all on earth, had alone made itself a home in his fierce old heart.

The wild joy of battle was indeed over, but for him the calm of peace had come at last. From his saddle where he sat to the wall whence she smiled down on him, not a score of spear-lengths divided him from Semiramis, looking fonder and more beautiful than she had ever appeared even in his lonely dreams.

CHAPTER X

A BANQUET OF WINE

ON the first night of his return from conquest, it was customary for an Assyrian king, his captains, and chief officers of state to be received by his consort with a banquet, offered to their special entertainment. The stars were already out, the moon was rising from the desert, when a thousand torches, flaring on the summer night, lit up the central court of the royal residence with a fierce red glow, vivid as the light of day. It brought out in strange grotesque relief the gigantic sculptures on the wall, till winged bull, man-faced lion, and eagle-headed deity seemed but fleeting flickering shadows, that moved, threatened, and retired, as the night breeze rose and fell. It played in variegated hues on the columns of porphyry and jasper that supported the upper storey, blackening the remote recesses of its lofty chambers, while marble pillar, shaft of alabaster, carving, cornice, and capital blushed in crimson flame. It shed a ruddier lustre on wine, fruit, and flowers, the rich profusion of a royal table, glittering from massive chalice and ancient flagon, blazing in jewelled cup and vase of burnished gold. The brilliant gems, the costly robes, the stately figures of those noble guests, were enhanced tenfold by its power; while the king's wan face showed paler, fiercer, ghastlier than ever, in that strong, searching glare. The procession had been long, the triumph protracted and wearisome; sacrifices offered, not ungrudgingly, to the gods, had delayed him with observances he loathed, ceremonials he despised; and Ninus had been in the saddle since daybreak. It was not strange then that Arbaces, his chief captain, sitting over against him, should have felt his heart sink while he looked on the ashy war-worn face, from which he had so often gathered counsel and resource, picturing to himself that he saw a dead monarch presiding, stark and grim, at his own funeral feast.

The king sat for a while with his head sunk on his breast, to all appearance thoroughly out-wearied and overcome; but

after Sethos had filled his cup more than once, a feeble light came into his eyes, while he glared around with a haughty air of inquiry, that seemed rather to threaten the absent than welcome those who were present at his festival. He looked sternly satisfied, however, with the number and importance of his guests—men who formed the props of his throne and the very bulwarks of his empire. There was Arbaces, captain of the host, firm in position as in character, a sage counsellor, a skilful leader, and a stout man of war in close fight, hand to hand; there was Sargon, his shield-bearer, who slew before the gates of Memphis, in single combat, seven Egyptian champions, one by one, and vowed in the hearing of both armies, that as he had sacrificed these to the Seven Stars, so would he take life after life from the host of Pharaoh till the Consulting Gods, the Judges of the World, and each of the Assyrian deities, had been propitiated with a victim. Scowling and silent, Sargon sat apart at the banquet; and a keen eye, scanning him warily and by stealth, noted the seal of murder set upon his brow.

There was Assarac too, the scheming priest, unwarlike indeed in form and nature, yet owning a more daring spirit, a more enduring courage, than the fiercest archer who ever drew bow from a war-chariot—Assarac, present in virtue of his office to pour out drink-offerings, to peer into the divining cup if required, above all, to watch with jealous supervision the temper and opinions of those who surrounded the king. Though aware that Ninus disliked, suspected, and would have put him to death without scruple, his eye never quailed, nor did his speech falter; and when he raised his goblet, filled to its brim, the eunuch's hand was firm and steady as a rock.

These last-named persons, with the older leaders and captains of ten thousand, were placed near the king; but scores of younger warriors, rising in fame, comely in person, and splendid in apparel, thronged the lower and more noisy extremity of the board. Over these, amongst whom Sarchedon was not the least remarkable, presided Ninyas, distinguished no less for his beautiful face and magnificent attire than for his deep draughts, reckless hilarity, and boisterous freedom of discourse.

"Once more in Babylon," said he, "after months of toil and heat, and worst of all, that torturing thirst! After those weary marches by day, those endless watches by night, welcome to the land of palm and pomegranate, peace and plenty, women and wine! What say you, Sarchedon? Well, I trow that, being of his guard, your duty bids you echo the

Great King. The old lion cannot hear you where you sit; you may speak the truth freely as if you were reading the Seven Stars. Confess, now. None but a fool would go forth in warfare who could stay to revel and sleep at home."

Sarchedon, though familiar with camps, was also no stranger to the usages of a palace.

"My lord did not seem of so peaceful a mind," he answered, "while he drove his war-chariot through the archers who lined her vineyards when we invested the city of Pasht, or it had cost us a weary siege ere we broke in pieces the idols of the Cat!"

"Well said, Sarchedon!" was the vain-glorious reply. "Why did we not push on, as I advised? By the gods of my fathers, I swear to you, that if Ninyas had been your leader but for one week, rather than the Great King, he would have left the Ethiopians to lose themselves amongst the marshes in our rear, fought a pitched battle on the plain by the sweet river, and you and I would have been drinking wine of Eshcol in the palace of Pharaoh at this moment."

It may be that Sarchedon had his own opinion of the strategy which should have conduced to so triumphant a result. He answered gravely enough—

"My lord confessed even now that he was far better in the palaces of Babylon. Is he not satisfied with the spoil, the captives, and the cheers of the people? They lifted up their voices when he passed to-day as it had been great Nimrod himself."

"The lazy drones!" laughed his well-pleased listener. "When I come to rule, they shall have something more to do than shout, I promise them. Reach me that flagon, I pray you—nay, hold! I am like my scoffing old sire, in one respect at least—I pour all drink-offerings down my own throat! No; what pleased me best to-day was neither spoil nor glory nor the voices of fools. It was the face of a maiden sweeter than the honeysuckle and fairer than the rose. Did you not mark her, Sarchedon? or were you so busy in attendance on the queen, my mother, that you had eyes for none beside?"

Stifling the hideous misgivings that rose like a flood in his heart, Sarchedon answered with forced calmness—

"My lord must have passed to-day under the glances of a thousand damsels, and every one his handmaid. The comeliest of all were standing behind Kalmim, in attendance on the Great Queen."

"You are blind! by the beak of Nisroch, you must be blind!" exclaimed the excitable young prince. "Take Kalmim herself—for when she has tired her head and painted her eyes she is the best of them, since the queen loves not too much beauty so near her own—but take Kalmim, I say, and tell me whether she shows not like a camel beside a courser when you compare her with the daughter of Arbaces. O! never bend your brows and look so scared towards the chief captain. He cannot hear us up there; and, by the belt of Ashur, the king's voice raised in anger is enough to deafen a man in both ears! What can have chafed the old lion to make him roar so fiercely, even over his food?"

In truth, the deep harsh tones of Ninus, loud and overbearing, were heard above the ring of flagons, the clatter of tongues, all the din that accompanies a feast—even above the vibration of the lyre, the roll of the drum, the soft sweet music floating on the night air from an unseen gallery, far off amongst the pillared corridors that surrounded the open court. Like the lion to which his graceless son compared him, Ninus was lashing himself into rage. His theme was the rapacity of priests, and, to use his own words, the extortions of the gods.

"Ten thousand of you!" roared the old warrior, turning fiercely on Assarac, of whom he had asked a question relating to certain details of the day's pageant. "Ten thousand demons! and for Baal alone. By the beard of Nimrod, he should be better served than any of us his descendants, who must needs feed the hungry swarming brood. And you would have me believe that there are gods as many as stars in heaven? Hear him, Arbaces! You and I have set armies in array ere this, so strong that our trumpets in the centre carried no sound to the horsemen on the wings; but if we are to have a thousand gods, and every god ten thousand priests, it will pass your skill and mine to devise how such a multitude may be ranged in order of battle. And one company of my bowmen would put them all to flight ere you could ride a furlong! Ten thousand priests of Baal! Ten thousand vultures tearing at a dead carcass! I trow there will be little left for the desert-falcon that struck the prey. You read the stars, forsooth, and can foretell the future easily as I can forget the past! Go to! Will you compute me the share of spoil I am likely to assign to-morrow for your entertainment and the altars of your gods?"

Without compromising one jot of his own dignity, the

wily eunuch's answer was yet temperate and respectful to the Great King.

"My lord is himself the child of Ashur and of Baal—the father gives freely to the son, requiring only honour and reverence in return."

"Fill my cup!" thundered the king to Sethos, who ministered hastily to his wants. "I have not found it so," he continued, harping still on the theme that thus chafed him. "The honour and reverence I pay them willingly, though they keep me standing long enough in their temples, and, perhaps because they sit so far off, it seems hard to make them hear. But if honour and reverence are to signify, sheep and oxen, wine, jewels, raiment of needlework, and heaps of treasure, they have had their share from Ninus—henceforth I will follow the example of those poor slaves we found in Egypt, the captives of our captives, who worship but one God, and offer him neither silver nor gold!"

"Therefore are they but servants to the servants of my lord the king," replied Assarac, unabashed by the frowns of Ninus and the open derision of certain veterans, who took their creed from their leader, as they took their orders—without comment or inquiry.

"Prate not to me!" was the angry answer; "I have scores of them down yonder bound in the outer court amongst my Egyptian captives. I cannot tell, Arbaces, what hinders me now, this moment, from sending you with a handful of spearmen to clear his temple of its white-robed locusts, and drive in these strangers, Egyptians and all, to worship Baal in their stead."

The chief captain, who to certain scruples of religion added those of custom, policy, and propriety, would have ventured on expostulation; but Assarac interposed.

"The gods, thy fathers, who look upon us to-night!" said he, in a stern loud voice, that awed even Ninyas and the younger revellers into attention while he pointed gravely upward where the stars were shining down in their eternal splendour on all the royal magnificence and glittering profusion of that feast in the open court. At the same moment, sweeping round the outer walls of the palace, vibrating through its long corridors and lofty painted chambers, there rose a cry so wild, so pitiful, so unearthly, that it arrested the goblet in each man's hand, froze the jest on his lip, and curdling the blood in his veins, caused him to sit mute and petrified, as if turned to stone.

The Great King started, and bade Arbaces summon up

his guard; but Assarac's voice was heard once more, solemn and majestic in its notes of warning and reproach.

"The gods, thy fathers!" he repeated, looking Ninus sternly in the face, "who have spared the blasphemer, but visited his sin on the innocent cause thereof. Hear those Egyptian prisoners mourning for a comrade this moment passed away, wearied and out-worn by a toilsome march to the house of his captivity, stricken and thrust through by the iron that has entered into his soul!"

It was indeed such a wail of bereavement and despair as was to rise hereafter through all its length and breadth in the land of the South, because of the terrible punishment that visited her people, "from Pharaoh that sat on the throne to the captive that was in the dungeon"—on that awful night, the climax of successive judgments, when "there was a great cry in Egypt, for there was not a house where there was not one dead."

As these long-drawn notes of woe swelled, sank, and swelled again, the king's first emotions of horror were succeeded by a fresh outbreak of wrath. It might have gone hard with the sorrowing herd of captives, and perhaps not one had been left to mourn for another, but that the old lion's fury, redoubled by its momentary check, was at this juncture wholly diverted and appeased. A burst of music, so loud, so full, so jubilant, that it drowned all other noises in its grand triumphant swell, announced the entrance of Semiramis; and like the Queen of Heaven rising from the dark background of night, this Queen of Assyria, blazing in jewels, and robed in the light of her incomparable beauty, stood forth a shining vision from the black shadows of the gateway, to move with stately step and slow through long lines of admiring revellers, ere she made her royal obeisance before the throne of gold, where sat the Great King. While she traversed the lower end of the court, Assyria's chosen warriors, the goodliest men of all the East, rose from the board and bent them low in courtly reverence, like a bed of garden-flowers doing homage to the south wind as it passes by. With a mother's love and a queen's dignity, she laid her hand on the shoulder of her son Ninyas, while he bowed himself before her; but it was a feeling stronger than the one, and but little in accordance with the other, that bade her pause by the side of Sarchedon and whisper tenderly in his ear. He started, colouring to his temples—two or three young warriors glanced enviously at their favoured comrade; but it was dangerous to observe too narrowly the motions of royalty, and each man

fixed his eyes in deep humility on the hem of her garment as Semiramis moved proudly on.

Ninus stirred uneasily where he sat. He would fain have risen to meet his queen, and taken her in his gaunt embrace to the fierce old heart that knew no other want; but such an innovation was not to be thought of even by the conqueror of the East, and he could only reach towards her the golden sceptre that lay on a cushion at his feet. While she pressed it to her fair white brow, there came a light in the old king's haggard face that told of the loving spark too often kindled but to be quenched in sorrow, the blind trust born to be betrayed, the fond unreasoning pride in another that goeth before a fall.

This final ceremony broke up the banquet. With loud peals of music, the king and queen, waited on by their personal attendants, betook them to their respective dwellings, between which ran the Euphrates, though under the broad river a tunnelled passage afforded free communication from one to the other. Arbaces and Sargon followed closely behind their lord, as Kalmim and her group of women accompanied the queen. Ninyas, pushing round a mighty flagon, called Sethos to his side, and swore he would not stir till midnight; an intention loudly applauded by many of the younger revellers, who gathered joyously round their prince. In the change of places that ensued, Sarchedon made his escape from the banquet, hastening through the outer gates to cool his brow in the night air, while he communed with his own perplexed aspiring heart. The queen's soft breath seemed still upon his neck, her whisper thrilling in his ear. What could she mean? "Follow the shaft! Fly on, fly upward!" Was it possible? Could the stars have written for him such a destiny as these words seemed to imply, or was he deceiving himself like a fool? And how was this upward flight to be accomplished? A thousand wild impossible longings and fancies filled his brain, but shining calmly through them all, like the moon amidst clouds and storm-wrack veiling a troubled sea, rose the gentle image of the girl he really loved. Could he give her up? Must it so soon come to an end, this dream, so short, so sweet, so cruel in its hour of waking? At any risk he was resolved to see her once again; that very night, that very hour, before the gods had time to cast his lot for him without recall. He hurried, like a ghost, through the shadows of the silent courts towards the palace of Arbaces.

But Ninyas, while he filled cup and emptied flagon, by

no means lost sight of those interests and pleasures which, in his royal opinion, constituted the chief advantages of his station as a prince. Sarchedon had not moved ten paces from his seat to leave the revellers, ere the king's son whispered to the king's cup-bearer, "Follow him, Sethos. A wise hunter never loses sight of his hound till he pulls down the deer."

CHAPTER XI

LIKE TO LIKE

DEEP in his own thoughts, and wholly unconscious he was watched, Sarchedon hurried through the outskirts of the palace, traversing, with one passing glance of curiosity and compassion, an open space in which the Israelitish and Egyptian captives lay bound. The voice of mourning was hushed at last among these sufferers, save where some weeping woman, waking, as it were, to a sense of intolerable misery, pressed both hands against her throat, and thus enhanced the long vibrations of that dismal wail—so piteous, so keen, so thrilling, that it stirred the very jackal in his lair amongst the vineyards without the city walls.

Groups of these prisoners sat or grovelled on the ground, in attitudes expressive of the utmost sorrow and desolation. Here was a wounded archer, one of Pharaoh's choicest marksmen, gnawing his bonds in impotent rage and shame, while he cursed the javelin that disabled him—the comrades who had fled and abandoned him to be taken captive—the gods in all their different earthly shapes of goose, bull, falcon, stork, and locust, whom he had worshipped faithfully by the Nile, that they might leave him here in Babylon to die. There was a cluster of children, the elder sleeping the calm lovely sleep of youth, the youngest prattling, laughing, stretching its little arms towards the stars. And beside them, on her knees, their tawny mother, with head bowed down, dark eyes fixed, dim but tearless, and thoughts far away in the South, by a rude hut raised on props above the river, where last she saw him stark, motionless, and gashed from brow to breastplate, the lover of her girlhood, the husband of her heart, the father of those dear ones, dragged, without hope of return, into the land of their captivity. Wherever grieved a dark-skinned mourner, from brawny warrior to tender maiden, there seemed to be embodied the very abandonment of woe; while a few Ethiopians, surprised by hazard amongst Pharaoh's auxiliaries, before they had

time to run away, wept and bemoaned themselves, with a force of lungs and vehemence of gesture, so unbridled as to border on the grotesque.

But somewhat apart, treated, as it would seem, by their Assyrian conquerors with less rigour than the rest, a handful of prisoners had disposed themselves, with scrupulous attention to decency of attitude and bearing. Conversing little, and only to each other, their low tones were forcible and expressive; their demeanour, grave and gentle, was marked with a certain sad dignity and grace. Though dark of beard and hair, they were far less swarthy in complexion than their fellow-sufferers, and while nobler of stature and fuller of limb, lacked the sinuous ease and pliancy of movement so remarkable in the slender Egyptian. Their high features, kindling eyes, and curved nostrils partook of the peculiar beauty general amongst their present masters; but they showed none of the haughty self-assertion, the lofty warlike bearing, of the fierce Assyrian race. Such kin they seemed to their conquerors as the dog to the wolf, the ossifrage to the eagle, the patient ox in the furrow to the fiery wild-bull of the fell.

Presently silence came over them, and taking advantage of the laxity of their fetters, one and all rose to their feet and stood erect. Then he who seemed eldest and gravest spoke a few words in a loud solemn voice, to which the others listened attentively, responding at intervals, with heads sunk on their breasts. Sarchedon, hastening past, had yet time to observe their motions, and marvelled, in his own mind, if this could be a religious ceremonial, thus divested of all pomp and outward form; no sacrifice of blood, nor drink-offering poured out, nor altar raised,—only deep awe and reverence impressed on every face, courage, love, and trust beaming in each worshipper's eyes. The white robe of a priest of Baal flitted through the darkness round the circle; but Sarchedon's heart was filled with a sentiment that left no room for interest or curiosity, save on one subject, and he sped towards his goal, longing only for the moment that should bring him face to face with her he loved.

The moon was low in the sky, yet gave light enough to have guided him on his way, even had not every step of it been familiar as the handle of his sword. Was it strange he should have found so readily a path that led to the home of Ishtar? that he should have had access to the roof of a dwelling adjoining the palace of Arbaces? that the girl herself should have been restless, unable to sleep, and fevered

with a desire to spread her carpets and cushions under the sky in the cool night air by the parapet of her father's house? No, it was not strange; and the reason seemed simple enough as explained in a low measured chant, by a rich sweet voice —richer and sweeter that it was toned down and suppressed —which thrilled and scorched through every fibre of the young girl's being, while Sarchedon poured forth his heart in passionate pleading conveyed through the fanciful imagery of the East.

"I pass'd without the city gate,
I linger'd by the way;
The palm was bending to her mate,
And thus I heard her say,

'The arrow to the quiver,
And the wild bird to the tree;
The stream to meet the river,
And the river to the sea.
The waves are wedded on the beach,
The shadows on the lea;
And like to like, and each to each,
And I to thee.

The cedar on the mountain,
And the bramble in the brake:
The willow by the fountain,
And the lily on the lake;
The serpent coiling in its lair,
The eagle soaring free,
Draw kin to kin, and pair to pair,
And I to thee.

For everything created
In the bounds of earth and sky,
Hath such longing to be mated,
It must couple, or must die.
The wind of heaven beguiles the leaf,
The rose invites the bee;
The sickle hugs the barley-sheaf,
And I love thee.
By night and day, in joy and grief,
Do thou love me?'

The palm was bending to her mate,
I marked her meaning well;
And pass'd within the city gate,
The fond old tale to tell."

When he ceased, she rose on him like a ghost, from behind the parapet. In another moment her veil was up, her sweet lips parted in a greeting that was rather breathed than spoken, and both hands were abandoned to the caresses of her lover.

"Ishtar," he murmured, "queen of my heart! I scarcely dared to hope, and yet I *knew* I should find you here."

"I thought not you would come," she whispered, for a girl's modesty thinks no shame to veil with ingenuous falsehood the truth of which she is really proud. "But I could not sleep—I could not rest under a roof—the war is over—my own dear father has returned safe. O Sarchedon! this has been such a happy day."

It was the first time she had called him by his name, and the endearing syllables dropped like honey from her lips. It was no more to be "noble damsel," "my lord's handmaiden," but "Ishtar," and "Sarchedon," because they knew they loved each other with all the rich warmth, the stormy passion of their race and climate.

"A happy day!" he repeated, rather bitterly; "and a day of victory for the fairest maiden in the land of Shinar! Think you it was such a happy moment for me, Ishtar, when I saw the love-gift hurled from our prince's chariot to your feet?"

She had not been a woman, could she have quite suppressed a double sense of triumph—of vanity gratified by the homage of a prince, and, sweeter far, of pride in his own avowal that she could excite the jealousy of him she loved. Very tender was her smile, very soft and kind her glance, while she replied—

"You may judge how I value the gift when I tell you the handmaidens are shredding herbs in it even now. Yet is he a goodly youth, our young lord, and a comely—fair he must surely seem in *your* eyes, Sarchedon, for is he not the very picture of his mother? and you of all men would be loath to dispute the beauty of the Great Queen."

It was a feminine thrust, and planted fairly home; but here in Ishtar's presence it rather roused in him a feeling of alarm, lest he should lose the blossom in his hand, than any wish to reach the riper and costlier fruit hanging above his head.

"Beloved!" he answered gravely, "the desire of queens and princes is like the hot wind of the desert, that blasts and scorches where it strikes. It matters little what befalls Sarchedon, if he loses her who has become the jewel of his treasure-house, and the light of his path. With the young prince, to see is too often to covet, and to covet, too surely to possess! It may be, that ere the days of triumph are over, he will have asked you of Arbaces in marriage, and

whither shall I go for comfort then, if I am to look nevermore on the only face I love?"

That face showed strangely pale in the wan light of the stars and crescent moon. There was a thrill of deadly fear in the whisper that appealed so piteously for succour and protection.

"Save me, Sarchedon, save me! It would be worse than death. What shall I do? What shall I do?"

He pondered, pressing the hand he held fondly to his eyes and forehead.

"Arbaces would not barter you away for treasure, like a herd of camels or a drove of captives?" he asked, after a pause.

"My father loves me dearly," she answered. "I know he fears to lose me; for he has often said, if I were to vanish from his side, like my mother, he would never wish to come out of his war-chariot alive."

"She was a daughter of the stars," said Sarchedon abstractedly; "their love is fatal to mortal men! You see, I have learned it all, and yet I care not—I have but you in the world!"

The daughter of the stars, he thought, had surely transmitted her celestial beauty to the girl who now bent fondly over him, and shook her head.

"They say so!" she answered. "But Arbaces is loath to be questioned, and I know not what to think. She may have been the child of a priestess of Baal, espoused to the god. I cannot believe that the stars have come down from their thrones for the love of women in these later days, since the plague of waters in the olden time, before the great tower of Belus was built. I only know I would I had my mother's beauty and my father's fame, and the wealth of the Great Queen, that I might bestow it all on the man I love. You would be rich, Sarchedon, and of high repute; while I should be—very, very happy!"

"Then, if Ninyas sent to ask you of your father," whispered the young warrior, "you would be loath to go and rule over him and his in a palace of gold?"

"Better to serve Sarchedon in a tent of goat's-hair," was the answer; "better by far draw water at the Well of Palms for your herds, your camels, and the fair horse you rode that happy morning; better to be the meanest and lowest of your slaves, than never see your kind face again!"

Vanity, pride, ambition—the dazzling career open to

him—the lustrous beauty of the queen: what were they to such love as this, but the flash and glitter of tinsel, compared with the ray of a real diamond. If a thought of Semiramis and her fatal favour crossed his brain, it did but spur him on to secure his happiness ere she could thwart it, to remove Ishtar, ere it was too late, from the sphere of the queen's displeasure, and the still more dangerous admiration of her son.

"Then I will ask you of your father before another day has gone down!" exclaimed Sarchedon, stealing his arm round that lithe slender figure, leaning over the parapet, like the palm-tree bending to meet her mate. "To-morrow will I send into the court below a score of camels and a hundred sheep, with a suit of the truest armour that ever brought the captain of a host unwounded out of battle, and my young men shall say to Arbaces—'they seek but Ishtar in return.'"

"So my father will summon me from amongst my maidens, to know if peradventure his daughter's heart hath gone forth to him who is so lavish of sheep and camels, so skilled in choice of armour, and what shall I say then?"

Only from the depths of a young girl's heart, happy and triumphant in her honest love, could have risen the smile that beamed on Ishtar's face. It was reflected in Sarchedon's eyes, while he answered—

"The daughter of Arbaces will tell him, that where her heart has gone forth, thither must Ishtar needs follow, and she will be mine!"

"And she will be yours!" repeated the girl, with a great sob of womanly happiness, tempered by maiden shame, the blood rushing to her face, while she hid it on her lover's breast.

Fast as her heart was beating, it had scarce counted a score of pulsations ere tramp of horses, call of servants, and flash of torches in the court below, announced the return of Arbaces from his duties about the Great King. No sooner had he dismounted at the porch of his palace than the fond familiar voice was heard, asking loudly for his daughter; and gliding like a shadow from the embrace of Sarchedon, she was gone. Yet even in that brief moment during which her brow was pressed against his bosom, she had discovered the amulet he wore, and knew, as women only do know such things, that it was not there when she saw him last. Perhaps to an impulse of female tenderness was added the stimulant

of female curiosity, when she whispered, even in the act of escape—

"To-morrow, beloved one, at the same hour. You will tell me then whence comes that jewel, and—and—if it was given you by the queen!"

Turning stealthily to depart, with his hand on the amulet, doubtful whether he would not tear it from his neck and trample it under foot, but in the meantime leaving it where it was, Sarchedon felt conscious of a strange depression, of vague misgivings, as though some future evil were casting its shadow about him ere it came. The air felt heavy, the night was darker, the stars had become dim. It seemed a different world as he passed along the silent streets towards his home, and those keen senses of his, quickened by the practice of war, must have been strangely blunted, that he neither saw the form nor heard the footsteps of one who had watched his interview with Ishtar from first to last. Sethos, no less nimble of foot than he was light of hand and heart, made such good haste in returning to the queen's palace, that he found Ninyas still seated at the banquet, flushed with wine, and more reckless, more impetuous, as he was more beautiful, for the excess.

"You are a trusty hunter," laughed the prince, steadying his uncertain steps as he rose with a hand on his favourite's shoulder, "and you followed the good hound bravely to the thicket where lies the deer? What think you? Is she worth the bending of a bow?"

"My lord had already wounded her with a random shaft," answered the cup-bearer. "It is the daughter of Arbaces, who flung him the posy of flowers as his chariot passed beneath her in our triumph."

The intelligence seemed to sober Ninyas on the instant.

"And it is Sarchedon who contends with me," said he, pondering. "By the brows of Ashtaroth, the sport grows to earnest now, and the prize will be won by him who can strike first!"

CHAPTER XII

THE GODS OF THE HEATHEN

HASTENING from the queen's palace towards his stolen interview with Ishtar, Sarchedon had not failed to observe the white robe of a priest in the neighbourhood of the Israelitish exiles, though his preoccupation forbade his identifying the person to whom it belonged. Sethos, on the contrary, whose wits were more at their master's service, had no difficulty in recognising Assarac, and marvelled in his own mind what interests could exist in common between the haughty servant of the Assyrian god, and this fettered prisoner, a captive even amongst the captives of the Great King's bow and spear. Could he have overheard their conversation, his curiosity would indeed have been sharpened, but any ideas he might have previously conceived regarding supernatural influences must have sustained a shock very confusing to his understanding and his faith. His interests, however, were of the earth, earthy, and he left to such aspiring spirits as the high-priest of Baal those abstruse speculations which would fain penetrate the mysteries of another world.

Assarac only waited till the last of the revellers had departed, the last of the thousand torches flaring in the palace court had been extinguished, to glide through the band of captives and lay his hand on the shoulder of him who seemed chief amongst the Israelites.

"Arise," said he, "my brother. Comfort your heart, I pray you, with a morsel of bread and a draught of wine, while your servant spreads his mantle for your ease, and loosens the fetters on your limbs."

He took the cloak from his own shoulders while he spoke, and folded it round the prisoner, releasing him at the same time from the chain that clanked and rung with every movement of wrist or ankle. The Israelite accepted these good offices with the imperturbable demeanour he had preserved through all the incidents of his captivity. Standing erect by

the priest of Baal, he seemed to look on his liberator with a mild and condescending pity not far removed from contempt. Scanning him warily and closely in the dubious starlight, Assarac could not but admire the lofty bearing and personal dignity of this chief amongst a nation of bondsmen. His marked features, dark piercing eyes, ample beard, and venerable aspect denoted the sage and counsellor, while his well-proportioned figure, with its shapely limbs, inferred an amount of physical strength and activity not always accompanying the nobler qualities of the mind. There was a strange contrast between the eunuch's shifting restless glances, his looks of eager curiosity, half doubtful, half scornful, altogether suspicious and dissatisfied, with the expression of quiet superiority and contented confidence that glorified the Israelite's face, imparting to it a calm majesty like the light of sunset on a mountain.

"You offer bread," said he, "and pour out wine unto him who hath neither cornland nor vineyard. Therefore shall your harvest and your grapes return you an hundredfold."

"Baal will not suffer me to want," replied the other. "Shall I, then, see my brother hunger and thirst, while I have enough and to spare? Are you not of our race and kindred? Are not your oppressors our ancient enemies? Do we not come of one lineage and worship the same God?"

The Israelite pointed upward to the stars, and shook his head.

"Our fathers have taught us otherwise," said he solemnly; "and I, Sadoc the son of Azael, standing here in the bonds of my captivity, protest against your idols, your temples and your worship, your gashes and drink-offerings, your winged monsters, your sacred tree, and all the thousand unworthy forms to which you degrade the majesty of the Omnipotent and the Infinite!"

Assarac smiled with the frank liberality of a disputant who in admitting his adversary's premises narrows, as it were, the field in which to do battle.

"Symbols," he answered, "symbols; the mere outward efforts of that inner spirit of worship which must find vent, like the mind of man, through the senses. He can see but with the eye, he can hear but with the ear, he can impart his thoughts only in those forms of speech that his tongue has learned to frame, and his fellows have skill to comprehend. How shall you express the principle of heat but by fire? How shall you comprehend the majesty of light but through the sun? How can you form a nobler ideal of spirits, gods, and departed heroes than in those serene and silent witnesses

who never weary of their endless watches in the unfathomable night?"

"So you send a thousand labourers to the mountain," replied Sadoc, pointing scornfully at the sculptures on the palace wall, "and bid them rend the granite from its unyielding sides till they have hewn out a creature such as was never seen in earth or sea or sky—a creature of make and qualities in direct defiance to that nature you profess to reverence—winged like a bird, headed like a man, limbed like a bull—a monster, grotesque, impossible, imposing only from its gigantic size and truthful outline. You rear it up at a prince's doorway, and call on men to fall down and worship before the hoofs of that which is lower than the lowest of the brutes in the system of creation!"

"Are you a priest among your people?" asked Assarac quickly.

"Every head of a family is the priest of his own household," was the dignified reply. "There need no mysteries for a worship sublime as the eternal heavens, and clear as the light of day."

"Yet surely you cannot move the multitude without extraneous influences stronger and more tangible than those truths of the inner shrine which we the initiated know and accept at their real value," argued Assarac. "That very figure which you scorn speaks to the senses of the Assyrian nation far more forcibly than all the promptings from within that ever moved a prophet to leap and howl and gash himself with knives before an altar, while he foretold great actions and mighty events that should never come to pass. Not a spearman in the Great King's host but, when he looks on these carven blocks of granite, walks with a prouder step and shakes his weapon in a stronger hand. He sees in that mighty frame the overpowering forces that have made his race conquerors of the world; in that majestic face, calm and indomitable, the true spirit of victory marching unmoved over the ruins of an empire as over the ashes of a peasant's hearth; in those unfurled wings, the ubiquity of a dominion that can command ships for the sea, camels for the desert, and horsemen swarming like locusts to overrun the fertile plain. It is no representation of mere nature evoked by the toil, skill, and indeed the sufferings of countless labourers, but of that spirit which dominates and subdues nature for its own aggrandisement and fame. Where is the type of godlike dominion to be found, if not here, in this impersonation of conquest: strength, intellect, and audacity combined?"

Sadoc pointed to an Egyptian child sleeping a few paces off with a wild flower grasped in its little hand.

"Is there less of the godlike power," said he, "in the skill that put together leaf and blossom for the delight of that poor infant, who has no other joy nor comfort?"

Assarac pondered.

"There must be gods," he replied, "as there are stars, differing in magnitude and glory. Dagon hath dominion on the waters, Anu and Abitur in the mountain, Merodach raging in battle is yet subject to Ashur, and even that monarch of the mighty circle yields to his irresistible superior, and bows before the sentence of Nisroch with the eagle's head."

"And your Nisroch," continued the Israelite; "hath he not also a master at whose word he spreads his wings and flies to the uttermost parts of the desert? Whence comes he? Who gave him his eagle's head and his feathered shoulders? If he is substantial, he must be perishable; and when he has passed away, who will make another god for the land of Shinar, and what shall he be called?"

"You speak with reason," replied the priest of Baal, "and you speak to one who has watched many a long night from the summit of the tower above us, and pored on those star-written scrolls till his brain reeled, to learn that mystery which rules the heavens, and apply it to the government of men below. You speak wisely indeed. Who shall make a god for the land of Shinar? He it is who shall bring the whole Eastern world beneath his feet."

"I speak not of gods made by men's hands," answered Sadoc. "The time must surely come ere long when there will be one worship of the true God through all the earth, as there is one sun that shines over the whole heaven. Clouds may obscure it for a season, but no less doth it exist in its warmth and splendour, giving vitality to creation and light to day."

"When there is but one worship, there will be but one dominion," argued Assarac. "The altar and the temple will then become the judgment-seat and throne, while the high-priest will be the true monarch and ruler over all. Listen, my brother; for indeed here in the house of your captivity you have found a friend. I am a priest of Baal, as you behold; but in truth I am no hot-brained votary who mistakes his own intoxicated frenzy for the inspiration of a god. My subordinates may gird their loins to leap and run and gesticulate, shedding their own blood the while in crimson streams. Such extravagances are foreign to my nature, and

below the dignity of my worship. I am a priest of Baal, but I am also an Assyrian descended from a line of warriors, and to me the greatness of my country is the paramount object and interest of life. What else have such as I, who are severed, without being alienated, from their kind? To extend an empire founded by our father Nimrod from the Bactrian mountains to the Southern sea, to behold the standards of Merodach waving on the confines of Armenia and over the gates of Memphis, while conscious that I, Assarac the priest, had set in motion the armies of victory and guided the march of triumph, were worth all the fire-worshipper's dreams of luminous immortality, all the starry thrones of the gods who are supposed to be looking down in judgment on us even now."

"And when your wishes have been fulfilled," said Sadoc quietly, "—wishes only to be accomplished through much bloodshed, cruelty, and sin—you will not be one whit happier than now."

The other laughed in scorn.

"Is fame nothing?" he asked. "Is power nothing? Is it nothing to cast down the mighty from their golden thrones, and to raise the lowly, as I have raised you to-night, from fetters of iron and a bed on the cold earth? Teach me the lore of your worship, as I will impart to you my own secrets of priestcraft, and hereafter—ay, sooner than you may think —I will set you in judgment over a score of nations, in a purpled robe, with a sceptre in your hand."

"*My* lore!" repeated Sadoc, with a sad smile. "You would deem it beneath your understanding, as it would be above your practice. It is but to do justice and to love mercy, dealing with man as before the face of God."

"But surely you have learned important secrets amongst the Egyptians?" urged Assarac, somewhat disappointed with this exposition of the Israelite's simple creed. "Surely they have taught you mysteries of magic and the art of divination, in which they boast their proficiency, handed down, as they profess, through scores of dynasties and hundreds of successive generations. Or is it true that your nation have been the teachers, and Egypt, with all her pride, is but the pupil of a people who took with them from this very land the art that we, its present inhabitants, have lost, the spells that compel gigantic spirits to work out their behests—rearing colossal buildings, causing wide tracts of desert to blossom like the rose, bidding the very waters of the great deep to subside and overflow at their will?"

"You know not our nation," answered Sadoc, "nor have you felt the iron hand of our oppressors, who practise the forbidden arts of which you speak, but with no result that hath ever spared groan or stripe to a single captive. The Israelite must toil under the scourge for his scanty morsel of bread. The great river indeed rises and falls at the command of One who is mightier than our task-masters, and who will not surely forget His people for ever in their bonds; but for the huge shapeless structures—the gigantic monster idols of the South—they are reared by a magic of which blood, sweat, and hunger constitute the spells, under the fierce eye that never sleeps, the cruel hand that is never raised but to urge, and smite, and destroy. Yet when our fathers were driven by famine into Egypt they found there one of their own people, reigning wisely over a prosperous nation, and second only to Pharaoh on the throne; they found themselves honoured guests where now they are degraded prisoners, friends and allies where now they are hated and despised, masters, in truth, where they are slaves! And slaves to those who are themselves sunk in the degradation of a vile and brutal idolatry."

His eye blazed, and his very beard seemed to bristle with anger, while he spoke. It was in such flashes of indignation or excitement that the likeness of kindred races was to be noted on the features of Israelite and Assyrian.

"You scorn the gods of Nimrod," replied Assarac, with a sneer; "but the fathers from whom we claim a common descent have taught *us*, at least, a nobler impersonation of our worship than the goose, the serpent, the stork, the locust, and the cat! If we choose the lotus, the fir-cone, or the beetle to convey an idea of that reproductive power in nature, always existing even when dormant, as the flower in the bud, or the blade in the seed, at least we do not hang our temples with carvings of the humblest animals, the most loathsome reptiles, and the meanest utensils of our daily life! It is baser, I grant you, to adore the stars than the principle which gives them light, baser to kneel before the sculptured image than the god it represents; but basest surely of all worship is that practised by the cruel Egyptian, the enemy whom *we* have humbled, the master who is grinding *your* people into dust!"

"Our God will surely free us," said Sadoc, in a low mournful tone. "It cannot be that we, the lineal descendants of His favoured servant, are to remain for ever in the house of bondage, eating the bitter morsel of slavery, weeping tears

of blood under the task-master's lash! But we have neither arms nor leaders; there is no proven harness in our dwellings, nor sword, nor shield, nor spear. How are we to go out from our enemies in the garb of peace, with our wives and children in our hands? And yet, I pray that it may come to this—I, for one, would march out fearlessly to die in the wilderness rather than gather another armful of straw, bake one more brick for the useless structures that only bear witness to our sorrows and our shame."

The pride of race, the intense consciousness of a peculiar destiny, in all ages an inheritance of the sons of Abraham, gave to the words of Sadoc a truth and bitterness, marked with no slight satisfaction by the scheming priest of Baal.

"Hands that have toiled so skilfully for their task-masters," said he, "can surely strike a blow in their own behalf. Courage that has borne long years of suffering and privation will not fail at the moment of liberation and revenge. You and yours are of our blood and lineage. You shall be no captives in Babylon, as you have been in Egypt. This very night I will take order for your food and lodging—nay, fear not, they shall be found you without the temple, if indeed you entertain any scruples as to entering the abode of Baal—and you shall return to your own people in safety and honour, as a son returns to the dwelling of his father with a gift in his hand. You will tell them that here, in the great city, our warlike Assyrians look on the Israelites as their kinsmen and friends; that when the oppressed rises against the oppressor, and the children of Terah resolve once for all to throw off the Egyptian yoke, they will see a cloud rising out of the desert from the trampling of horses, countless as locusts in a west wind—they will hear a thousand trumpets sounding far and wide from the hosts of the Great King!"

The Israelite's eye sparkled and his cheek glowed, but he answered solemnly—

"It must be a mightier king than yours, who leads us forth into the wilderness out of the house of our captivity."

CHAPTER XIII

MOTHER AND SON

NOT the least sumptuous range of halls and chambers in the queen's palace had been devoted, from his boyhood, to the accommodation of her son. Here, surrounded by his own servants, he had lived ever since he could walk alone in princely state and magnificence, imitating, though on a less extended scale, the splendour of the Great King's court, and exacting from his attendants those ceremonious observances which somewhat chafed his father's spirit, causing the fiery old warrior to break out in words and gestures savouring rather of the swordsman's impatience than the monarch's dignity. Here too he had been trained under the queen's own eye in manly exercises befitting his rank, practising mimic warfare on the wide terraces of the royal dwelling, and even hunting the lion in dangerous earnest through its spacious paradise, a wilderness in the heart of the swarming city.

It had been the policy of Semiramis, as it was her pleasure, to keep the future monarch under her own eye and within her immediate influence, teaching him to depend on her alone for all his occupations and amusements, thus obtaining an ascendency over his young mind, which daily custom rendered so easy and natural, that he never attempted to shake it off. Arrogant at the feast, valorous in the fray, reckless and unscrupulous in the gratification of every passing desire, every whim of the moment, he was yet in his mother's presence the same loving wayward child, who, though wilful and petulant, had ever looked to her alone for succour and encouragement, had run to her knee with a bruised skin or a tear-stained face, and would have begged of her, with equal confidence, a bunch of grapes and a string of pearls worth a king's ransom. It

was not strange then, that, waking from his heavy slumbers after the banquet, with a vague impression of some unfulfilled desire burning at his heart, his first wish was for his mother's presence, even before he remembered the purpose for which he wanted her assistance and advice.

Semiramis, on this the morning after his return from a campaign in which her boy had won no slight reputation as a warrior, passing into his chamber according to custom, found him, as she had often found him before, tossing, heated, and restless on his couch, pushing his short dishevelled locks off his brow, while he turned on her a glance, half mirthful, half imploring, from eyes deep, liquid and beautiful as her own. The queen's head was tired, her dress arranged with the utmost skill and care, while in her gait and bearing there was a dignity of repose no less graceful than becoming; but if her dark locks had been unbound, her robes shaken into disorder, and her fair face heated with the flush of mirth, pleasure, or excitement, surely never had been seen so wondrous a resemblance as existed between that unquiet youth on the couch and the beautiful woman who bent over him to lay her hand against his hot forehead with a gesture of endearment and caress.

"What ails my boy?" asked Semiramis, looking fondly down on her graceless offspring. "Was the triumph yesterday so long and wearisome? the wine of Eshcol last night so rough and new? Or has he left his heart among the daughters of Egypt, in exchange for the fame and high repute of valour he has brought with him from the Nile?"

"I wish I had never gone there!" answered Ninyas petulantly. "I wish the reins had rotted in his hand who turned my chariot from the gates of brass to leave Babylon and all the pleasures it contained!"

"It would not have been like your father's child," said the queen, "to have forborne going forth to warfare with the host. You would not be *my* son," she added more tenderly, "did not your heart leap to the rattle of a quiver and the roll of a chariot, wheeling at a gallop amongst the spearmen. Think you it was no pain to me when I sent you down yonder to learn your first lesson in war, under the eye of my lord the king? But you have made yourself a name for valour, and I am content."

"Valour!" repeated Ninyas. "Men have a strange way of computing courage and portioning out the fame, which is indeed of small value when you have got it. Is it such a great deed to be driven under shield in a chariot of iron

through ranks of half-armed wretches flying for their lives? I saw one of our bowmen stand his ground in a vineyard, when we passed the Nile, having three arrows in his limbs, and a spear through his body. But Arbaces scarce cast an eye on him as he drove by in hot haste to bring up the rearguard of spears; and I thought, if a man would be accounted mighty, it were well to be born a king's son. Valour indeed! That very day, an hour later, I would have bartered all the valour and all the fame of the Assyrian army for a cup of the roughest wine that ever burst a skin. I love pleasure, for my part; and whosoever will have it is welcome to my share of hunger and thirst, long marches, weary sieges, heat, privation, night watches, and all the troubles of war."

The queen smiled, well pleased, as it would seem, with this frank confession of opinions, in which of all women on earth she was the least inclined to share. Had she been a man, she thought, the saddle should have been her only home, the spear never out of her hand. Not even Ninus, with his insatiable desire for fame, should have flaunted so far and wide the banners of Assyria, so pushed the conquests of the mighty line founded by Nimrod the Great. And yet here was one of her own blood, her very counterpart, who, being of the stronger and nobler sex, could sit calmly down in the flush of his youth to scoff at warlike honours, to confess his unworthy preference of inglorious ease and material pleasures to the immortality of a hero.

"For one so young," said she, "you have already attained to high dignity. Even my lord the king has spoken of you as a judicious leader and a man of valour in fight. Arbaces himself was obliged to admit,—my son, you are ill at ease,—Arbaces, I say, though so devoted to the king's interests that he seems to look with an evil eye on the king's successor, could not but acknowledge that on the field you were a worthy descendant of the line of Ashur; though in camp, he added, the example of one prince was more injurious to the discipline of armies than the taking of ten towns by assault, with all the license and outrages of a storm."

There was enough of his father's nature in the lion's cub to bring the flash to his eye, the scowl to his brow, while he listened.

"Arbaces dared to speak thus of me!" he exclaimed, springing to his feet, and grasping instinctively at a gilded javelin standing against the wall. "He must be a bold man, this chief captain of the Assyrian host."

"He must be a bold man," repeated the queen, "since he is your enemy and mine."

"Let him beware!" said the prince. "I can take up my mother's quarrel as heartily as my own. He will have no woman to deal with if he crosses me. And yet," he added, sinking back on the couch, and turning his head aside amongst its cushions, "there is not in the whole empire one whom I would so gladly call my friend."

A shade of perplexity crossed the queen's brow; but she forced a careless laugh while she asked—

"What have you, the future ruler of all the earth, to gain from this war-worn spearman, whose very existence hangs on the breath of your father, my lord the king?"

He turned to her with one of the caressing gestures of his childhood; and even the queen's steadfast heart wavered for a moment in the merciless prosecution of her schemes.

"Mother," he said, "you have never denied me from my youth upward what I asked. Give me now the daughter of Arbaces, and I am content. If she be withheld from me, I care not to look on an unveiled woman again."

As the light of morning creeps over a fair landscape, the queen's smile brightened her face into matchless beauty; as the summer sky is mirrored in the lake, that smile was reflected on the glowing features of her son. Again how comely they were, and how alike!

"Is she then so fair," asked Semiramis, "this pale slender girl, to whom you flung a cup of gold yesterday from your chariot in return for a posy of flowers? Such exchanges, my son, are made every day in follies like yours; but I did not believe that a bow drawn thus at random could have sent its shaft so deftly through the joints of your harness. Is there magic about the girl, that she draws men to her feet with a mere look and sign? I have heard that her mother was a daughter of the stars."

"The daughters of earth are good enough for me," replied the prince. "But if this one comes not into my tent, I will never look in the face of woman again."

"The tent is not to be despised," answered Semiramis, glancing round the gilding and vermilion, the beams of cedar, the inlaid flooring, the purple hangings, of that painted chamber. "And she must be difficult to please, if she find fault with its lord. Nevertheless, there are obstacles in our way. Arbaces would surely neither wish nor dare to oppose us, and, if he did, could be silenced or removed. But how shall we set aside the opposition of my lord the king?"

"He would never consent," said Ninyas; "I know it too well. The millstone is not harder than the heart of the Great King. May he live for ever!"

"May he live for ever!" repeated the queen. "Those of Nimrod's race are indeed immortal; and you have little to hope from the lapse of time. Tell me, my son—do you really love this girl so much?"

"I would give my whole life afterwards," he answered passionately, "to bring her here into my dwelling for a year and a day."

At the moment, no doubt, he spoke truth. The stream of a passing inclination, stemmed by opposition and difficulty, had swelled into a torrent of desire he had neither power nor inclination to control.

"And if you might take this fair dove to your bosom," continued the queen, "would you consent to forego Babylon and its pleasures? Would you make your escape in secret, and remain for a season in seclusion, until the wrath of the Great King was overpast?"

"I am ready to go now," answered the impetuous boy. "My horses are of the purest breed in all the land of Shinar. I will fly with her to the ends of the earth."

"You need not go farther than Ascalon," replied his mother with a smile. "In mine ancient stronghold, rude and timeworn though it be, I can still count many a friend who would beard Ninus and all his line at my lightest word. And the common multitude are devoted to my service far more than in Nineveh, or even here in Babylon, which but for me would still have been a mere hamlet of huts in a marsh. My son, if ever you come to rule, trust no longer to the people's gratitude than while you have benefits to confer: the loyalty of a nation is seldom proof against a rise in the price of corn. Nevertheless, in lofty Ascalon you may be safe and secret enough, until time and my constant entreaties shall have softened the resentment of my lord the king. The girl is willing, of course," continued the queen, tenderly and in a half-sorrowful tone; "for such faces as yours are made to be the ruin of all who look on them too freely."

No woman, she was thinking, could resist that smile of her boy's—so fond, so winning, so like her own. Ninyas hesitated; and once more his hand stole towards the javelin by the wall.

"There must be neither delay," said he, "nor hesitation. The girl would love well enough without doubt; but—but—" here the blood flew to his temples and the angry light to his

eye—"another has seen her, and would fain make her his own: one who brought here tidings from the camp before the host marched in—a goodly youth and a brave warrior. Nevertheless, he must die."

"Not so," exclaimed the queen, turning pale. "Believe me, this is a matter to be carried through by the fine wit of woman, rather than the strong hand of man. You must abide wholly by my counsel. I have never failed you, my son. Shall I fail you now in this your great need?"

It is possible that, had he trusted implicitly to his mother's guidance, her heart might have been softened and her purpose set aside even now; but he flung his head up impatiently, and threatened where he should have confided or cajoled.

"I will not wait a day!" he exclaimed angrily. "I will not sit still while another is in my place. Sarchedon loves this girl very dearly, and in a few hours I may be too late."

"Sarchedon does *not* love her," hissed the queen through her clenched teeth, while her face turned white. "Foolish boy!" she added, recovering her self-command, "with all your manhood and your valour, you are as much a child as when you cried on my knee for a lotus-flower or a pomegranate; and you must even have your toy to-day, at any sacrifice, though you tire of it to-morrow, like the wilful babe you are."

"I am satisfied when I have what I want," answered Ninyas. "Is it not so with us all, from the Great King to the spearman that marches by his chariot? Even Ninus will chafe and roar and lash himself into rage like the lion of the desert, if the merest trifle runs contrary to his whim. Am I not his son, mother, as well as yours?"

"You are more easily ruled than your father," answered the queen. "And it is well for you, my boy, that with your mother's form and features you inherit her temperament—joyous, placable, and easily moulded to the wishes of those you love." She spoke in a light bantering tone, not entirely devoid of scorn. "Carry your toy with you, if so it must be; but do not murmur at the measures I take for your safety, nor quarrel with the restraint that can alone preserve you from the king's anger, as a young warrior chafes under the weight of that harness which fences death from his heart."

"I only ask for the daughter of Arbaces," was his reply. "Give me the desire of mine eyes, and do with me what you will."

"You shall carry her off from her father's house to-night,"

said the queen. "Follow my counsel, and you shall pounce on the girl, swift and secure as the hawk when she strikes a partridge on the mountain. Ride out of the great gates, taking Sethos, or some one attendant whom you can trust, with bow and spear, as though you purposed hunting the lion in the desert. Let none see you return, but steal back to the city in the darkness of night. I will take order for such a band of spearmen to be under arms as no single household could attempt to resist, and I will place one at their head who knows neither compunction nor remorse. With these you shall force the gate of the chief captain's palace. When they have gained possession of the court, I need scarce tell you, my son, so lately returned from warfare, the rights of those who occupy the stronghold of an enemy—the women's apartments are not far to seek. A shawl may be round her head, and the girl herself on the back of your best horse or swiftest dromedary, in less time than it will take to put to the sword such few servants as Arbaces can muster in the first watch of night. Ere the alarm is sounded and the city in arms, you should be many a furlong off in the desert, galloping towards your place of refuge, like a wild stag to the hill."

"And Arbaces?" asked Ninyas. "He has the courage of a lion. He will resist to the death."

"Arbaces will take his chance like another," answered the queen coldly. "An adversary who stands in the path, my son, must be ridden down, ere we can pass on. Nevertheless, I will not have a hair of your head fall in this business. A few priests of Baal shall accompany the spearmen,—wrap one of their linen robes about you, and thus avoid detection as well as danger; but do not neglect to wear your armour underneath. Is that a proven harness I see yonder, thrown aside in the corner?"

"It is inlaid with gold," answered Ninyas lightly, "and curiously wrought; but Pharaoh's bowmen have blunted many a shaft on it, and it turns the thrust of a spear as it were a bulrush."

While he spoke, the queen had taken a helmet from amongst the other pieces of armour, and placed it, laughing, on her brows.

"They say I am like my mother," exclaimed her son, "in face and bearing. By the beauty of Ashtaroth, it must be true! When I look at you, I seem to see my own image on the march stooping down to drink from a stream!"

CHAPTER XIV

STRONG AS DEATH

IT is well known that secrets are not to be kept from princes, and that for royal ears "the bird of the air shall carry the voice, and that which hath wings shall tell the matter," however scrupulously it may be hidden from curiosity of lower rank. Sarchedon's interview with Ishtar had been witnessed by Sethos, who reported it, as in duty bound, to Ninyas; and although that wilful youth, ignoring, according to custom, everything running counter to her wishes, never mentioned it to his mother, the whole affair came to her knowledge very soon after Semiramis had quitted the apartments of her son. It may be that in Assyrian palaces, below the surface of forms and ceremonies, stole an under-current of interest, intrigue, and license, which, eddying upward on occasion, troubled the courtly waters to the brim, and those who lived habitually in an atmosphere of luxury and magnificence refused to deny themselves certain relaxations of the heart or senses, that relieved the peasant's toil, and sweetened his hard-earned fare.

Sethos was a comely youth with laughing eyes; Kalmim a black-browed dame, joyous of temperament, and pleasant to look on as a summer's morning. It was natural that the woman's maturer tact and greater experience should lead the king's cup-bearer into confidences it had been wiser to withhold; and whatever Kalmim learned of good or evil, within or without the city walls, she lost no time in imparting to her mistress. Semiramis listened, to all appearance undisturbed. Only the most practised of tire-women could have marked how the blue veins about her temples traced themselves more distinctly, how the colour turned a shade fainter in her cheek. And yet what rage and self-contempt were tearing at her heart! That she, whose wishes were daily anticipated almost before they were formed, who, never since she arrived at woman's estate, and succeeded to her royal inheritance of matchless beauty, had left a desire ungratified, should find,

here in Babylon, the citadel of her power, the very throne, as it were, of her dominion, a man who could resist the one and undervalue the other, preferring, to the Great Queen's favour, and such a destiny as the mightiest monarch on earth might envy, the smile of a sickly girl, the simple follies of a homely, humble, unpolluted love!

"Tire me nobly, Kalmim," said she, sitting before a mirror of burnished silver, that reflected her faultless form from head to foot. "There must be no crevice in mine armour to-day—not a fold must be ruffled, not a plait laid awry, since I go hence straightway into the presence of my lord the king." Thus to her woman, but to her own heart: "He will be on duty about the gates. He shall see how fair that face is he has dared to despise, and look on the beauty he undervalues, till he turns faint and sick and dizzy in its rays. I will crush him to the earth, and when he sues at my feet for the hope I bade him but yesterday to entertain, I will turn coldly away, and leave him to perish like a trampled worm. But he shall not go to this girl for comfort in his despair—no, he shall die! I have said it; he shall die! O Sarchedon, Sarchedon, I could not hate you so bitterly, did I not love you so well!"

And all the while not a quiver moved her eyelid, nor caused her jewelled hand to shake, while it smoothed the soft dark hair on her brow; the fair bosom itself, white, smooth, and polished, seemed also hard and motionless as marble. How different, the thought struck her, as she rose to depart—how different was that stately figure sweeping past the mirror from the flushed and panting woman, who, with shining eyes and heated cheeks, and dewy lips apart, had bent over the sleeping form of Sarchedon, to drop her love-token in the breast of him on whom she had set her heart! And yet, could it be because she had lost him, she asked herself, with fierce rage and longing, that he was a hundred-fold more precious now?

There are women whom it is very dangerous to love, as in Eden there stood a tree that it was death to taste. But the forbidden fruit was gathered nevertheless; and these beauties seem to allure more than their share of victims, to win more than their natural meed of triumph. Perhaps it is their destiny to avenge on mankind the common wrongs of their sex, and to fall at last by the very weapons they have wielded so successfully in their march over a host of slain.

The old king's eyes were dim, and his senses failed him

perceptibly, as life waned gradually, yet surely, like an unfed lamp, or a leaking vessel of wine. The pomp of royalty, the joy of battle, the feast, the pageant, the bright steel quivering in his grasp, the good horse bounding between his knees,—what were they all now but shadows, memories, vague idle dreams of the past? Was this the hand, he was fain to ask himself, that drew the heaviest bow in the broad land of Shinar, the arm that could drive a javelin through and through the lion's heart?

Yonder upon the wall was sculptured many a deed of prowess, many a noble triumph of warfare or the chase. Warriors in long array were marching to the battle or the siege; archers bent their bows, slingers and spearmen smote and slew, and spared not; horsemen galloped, chariots rolled, and vultures soared over heaps of corpses. A bank was raised against a city, the battering-ram laid to its gates, while amidst a shower of arrows and javelins men were falling headlong from its walls, to feed the fishes in the river below. Again, linked in a cruel chain, the line of captives paced slowly by, bearing on their shoulders children, household stuff and goods, equally the spoil of their conqueror. The men marched sullenly, with downcast looks; the women beat their breasts and tore their hair. Here, with hook in his victim's nostrils, or knife to flay his naked flesh, a fierce warrior tortured some poor suppliant slave. There, proffering for a tribute the productions of his country—garments, gold, grain, animals wild and tame—some cringing wretch implored mercy at the feet of his executioner. But amongst all these scenes of strife, glory, and rapine, one figure still predominated, tall, fierce, and stately, the high tiara bound about its brows, bow and spear in hand; but, whether careering in the war-chariot over prostrate enemies, or sitting on the throne of state under the royal parasol, there was still poised above its head the winged mystery within a circle that heralded the sacred person of a king. Could this be the same Ninus, he asked himself, whose limbs, so stiff and aching, now endured his silken robes with less patience than once they had carried his iron harness, whose head wavered and nodded on the lean neck that was once a tower of strength, proud, erect, colossal, like a column of stone?

And that winged figure in the circle. What was it? Did it really hover over them to protect the race of Nimrod in battle, or was this too a myth, a fable, a mere imposition of the priests? Should he know when he went to join his

ancestors? and would it be long—how long!—ere he took his place among the stars?

There was not much to leave, after all! The wild bull had been driven from the plains, and could be found in no nearer fastness than the northern mountains now. He had himself exterminated the lion within the paradise round his palace, and it was weary work to ride in search of him over the scorching desert. Even the rush of battle was not what it used to be. Where were the men of the olden time, such as the champion he slew in Bactria, who stood two palms'-breadths higher than the tallest warrior of either host, leaning on their spears to witness the single combat between a giant and a king? Or that fierce Ethiopian in the first Egyptian campaign, whom Pharaoh's chief counsellor had made captain of his armies for his matchless valour, and whose sturdy assault caused Ninus to reel and stagger where he stood, ere the swarthy swordsman went down under the buffets of the Great King, then in the vigour of his prime? But in his last expedition the armies of Egypt seemed to give way without a struggle before his spear, and it was hardly worth while to bid his chariot driver turn his hand into the press of battle. Even the wine of Eshcol was tasteless now; the wine of Damascus worse, and the feast had become loathsome to him as the fray. He was weary of it all, could give it up without a regret, but for the queen.

Feeling, in spite of his angry protest against his own misgivings, that the link which bound them together grew slighter every day—that, like a frayed bowstring, it must snap at last, and leave her free—the love in his fierce old heart began to be tinged with a savage and unreasoning jealousy, such as made him intolerant of every glance she directed at another, of every moment she was absent from his side. He had summoned her to his presence with all those forms and observances, the necessary ceremonial of royalty, which chafed him now more than ever; and in his impatience he bade the light-footed Sethos hurry to and fro to see if the queen and her train of attendants were not yet at the gates, although from where he sat in his throne of state he could command a noble approach, some furlongs in length, through double lines of colossal monsters, leading to the wide entrance of his palace. A jewelled cup, filled to the brim, stood neglected at his hand. Ever and anon he stormed at Sethos because the wine had lost its flavour, and the queen tarried so long.

"I could put on and prove ten suits of harness," said the

Ere the swarthy swordsman went down under the buffets of the great King.

angry old monarch, "in less time than it takes a woman to tire her head! And yet one hair of that comely head is surely better worth preserving than the whole of this worn-out body of mine, that hath scarce strength left to draw a bow or empty a cup. Saw you not, Sethos, how fair she looked on the wall above us when we rode in, slender and pliant like a spear bending beneath a truss of forage? Who was attending her, boy? My memory halts and fails me now worse than a ham-strung steed."

"Kalmim, my lord," answered the cup-bearer, "with certain of the women, and Sarchedon."

He was too good a courtier to mention Assarac, dreading the storm a priest's name was likely to bring down in the king's present mood.

"Sarchedon," repeated Ninus—"one of my own guards. A stout warrior enough, in the boy's play we call fighting now, and a comely youth—ruddy and comely as a maid. How came he absent from his duty in the ranks?"

"He had been sent by my lord from the host with the Great King's signet to the queen," was the reply. "He has remained in attendance on her ever since."

The old face turned grey with some hidden pang, and the bloodshot eyes rolled savage under their shaggy brows.

"By the beard of Nimrod, I will take better order with these golden guards of mine!" exclaimed the king. "Do they think, because Pharaoh and his bowmen are no longer flying before my chariot, I have beaten my sword into a pruning-hook, and have forgotten how to mount a war-chariot or set a company in array? Where is this deserter now?"

"He is on duty at the great entrance," was the respectful answer. "My lord the king may see him from where he sits."

Sarchedon, in truth, with a handful of his comrades, was on guard at the palace gate, conspicuous even amongst those goodly warriors by the beauty of his person and the splendour of his attire. Ere the king could summon him to his presence, his attention was diverted by the approach of his wife, followed by the women of her household; a fair and fragrant company, that wound through the avenues of winged bulls and colossal monsters, like a growth of wild flowers trailing across the surface of a rock.

The king's eyes were not too dim to mark every movement of the woman he loved. His old heart began to beat faster and the blood stirred in his veins. How fair and noble was the bearing of that shapely figure, as it glided on with

the measured step that became her so well! How delicate and beautiful the pale face! so easily recognised even at a distance from which its features could not be distinguished, and bringing back to him as it was unveiled now, on entering her husband's dwelling, that well-remembered morning in Bactria, when she rode into the camp serene and radiant, like a star dropped down from heaven.

What was this? He started, and half rose from his throne; for she had paused amongst the guards, and one of them had fallen on his face at her feet.

Semiramis, who was above all the forms and ceremonies that trammelled weaker natures, breaking through them at will in court, camp, or palace, had resolved to take signal vengeance on Sarchedon whenever she should see him, careless alike whether they met in the desert, on the house-top, or here in the formidable presence of the king. She knew how to stab him too, and determined, at whatever cost to her own feelings, she would drive her thrust home. How beautiful he looked, standing there in his golden helmet, with the scarlet-bordered mantle falling from his shoulders, and the white tunic reaching to his knee! Not Menon, she thought, when he wooed her by the silver lake that mirrored the towers of Ascalon, was half so fair; but Menon loved her dearly, while this man—well, she would make him eat the hardest morsel, drink the bitterest waters of affliction, and afterward he should die. What would be left her then? The love of this old dotard, the hollow pageantry, the empty pleasures, the heavy magnificence of a court. How she loathed them all! And what good would it do her even to attain supreme power if she must rule alone, without companionship, without sympathy, without love?

She had wavered in her purpose a hundred times ere she stepped as many paces. She was inflexible when she bade Sarchedon come forward from the line of his comrades, irresolute while he advanced, and pitiless once more as he prostrated himself at her feet.

"You are entitled to ask a request," said she, very coldly and haughtily, "as having borne hither the signet of my lord the king. It is my part to intercede with him in your favour, and the old custom in our land of Shinar bids him grant your desire, even to the half of his kingdom."

His eyes lightened with pleasure, and her heart turned to stone. Yet even in that moment she marked that he still wore her amulet round his neck.

The name of Ishtar was on his lips, but some instinct of

the palace—it may be something in the queen's face—forbade him to pronounce it. He had wit enough to bow his forehead in the dust, and to answer—

"I do but desire the light of her countenance, and permission to abide in the service of the Great Queen."

She was not deceived by his submission, though her eyes shone with a softer lustre while she continued—

"Is there no treasure you covet, no post of honour you desire, no maiden in the whole land of Shinar you would fain take home with you to your tent?"

"I may not lift mine eyes to Ashtaroth," was his cautious reply. "If I must needs choose from among the flowers of earth, I would beg of the Great Queen to give me Ishtar, the daughter of Arbaces."

She was ready with her blow. Looking him full in the face, with the calm pitiless smile of one who puts some wounded reptile out of pain—

"It is too late," she said, in hard cutting accents. "The damsel has been promised to my son. Even now the prince is lifting her veil to salute his bride!"

In his agony he fell forward, grasping the queen's robe wildly in his hand. The Great King sprang to his feet, his beard bristling, his very eyebrows shaking with ungovernable anger. For a space he could not even find voice to speak. Then he burst out—

"By the blood of Nisroch, it is too much! He has laid hands on the queen before my very face! Were he flesh of my loins and bone of my body, he should be consumed to ashes. Ho, guards, away with him! Cover his face, and lead him forth!"

A score of hands grasped the offender, a score of spears were pointed at his breast. Though it was her own act—nay, *because* it was her own act—a strong revulsion of feeling caused the queen's stately form to shake from head to foot: and in that supreme moment she swore to her own turbulent heart that, come what might, even to the fall of the Assyrian empire, Sarchedon should *not* die! She passed swiftly to the throne, and lifting the king's sceptre, laid one end of it against her forehead, while she placed the other in his hand.

'My lord," she said, "this is the feast of Baal. It is not lawful to slay an Assyrian born during the worship of the great Assyrian god."

There shone a red light in the king's eyes that meant death, and the foam stood on his lip. When he looked thus,

it was in vain to sue for pardon. Nevertheless, he passed his wrinkled hand over the fair brow of the woman kneeling at his feet.

"Be it so," said Ninus. "To-morrow he shall die at sunrise. The king hath spoken."

Then the guards looked furtively in each other's faces; for all men knew from such a judgment there was no appeal, in such a sentence no hope of mercy or reprieve

CHAPTER XV

THE QUEEN'S PETITION

SARCHEDON was hurried away in the custody of his former comrades, who, pitying the fate their experience taught them was inevitable, had yet discretion to take him from the presence of Ninus ere some hideous cruelty or mutilation should be added to his punishment. They were hardly out of the king's sight, however, when a priest of Baal, arriving in breathless haste, brought an order from Assarac to deliver up their prisoner in the temple of the god. On the festival of that national deity, unusual respect was paid to the sacerdotal character; and as, even amongst the guards of the Great King, Assarac's policy had taught him to cultivate friendship and acquire influence, the high-priest's behest was obeyed readily, as if it had emanated from Arbaces or even Ninus himself. Sarchedon therefore became only so far a prisoner that he was not permitted to pass the guards at any point of egress from the sacred building, but might roam at large through its spacious chambers, speculating on his chances of escape when night should fall, and he could take advantage of such secret communications as his knowledge of its votaries taught him must surely exist between the temple and the town.

Meantime, however, he was a caged bird, yearning wildly for freedom because of her whom he dearly loved. The queen's shaft was shot deftly home, and the poison with which it had been tipped did its work as cruelly as the pitiless archer could have desired. It was madness to think of Ishtar in the arms of Ninyas; to feel that, whilst he was a prisoner here, she might even be struggling for personal freedom, perhaps calling on him to save her in vain. But men trained to warfare acquire the habit of reviewing calmly all sides of a dilemma, neither undervaluing its difficulties nor despairing to vanquish them; especially they take into consideration the bearing of probabilities and the important doctrine of chance. It was not long before Sarchedon

reflected he had himself seen Arbaces under shield and helmet within a brief space of the queen's arrival at her husband's palace; that if the espousals of his daughter were really taking place with a prince, the chief captain would hardly be absent from such a ceremony; and that Semiramis might have thought it not below her dignity to tell him an abolute falsehood for reasons of her own — reasons, he suspected, that ought to be flattering to his self-love and conducive to the safety of his person. It was impossible to mistake her avowed interest, her obvious condescension, her changing moods, and the bitterness with which she accosted him in their late interview under the very eyes of the Great King. If Semiramis loved him, he thought, she would surely provide for his escape; and the first use he would make of his freedom should be to seek Ishtar and urge her to fly with him at once. Merodach could bear them both far beyond pursuit into the desert, where they would find a hiding-place from the king's merciless hatred and the queen's more cruel love.

Sarchedon then, imprisoned in the temple of Baal, was hardly so ill at ease as the wilful imperious woman whose reckless malice had brought him to captivity and shame. The old king scowled at her with fierce jealousy and rage as her eyes followed the retiring form of the culprit, hurried out of the royal presence with judicious promptitude by his comrades; but from the first moment Ninus ever looked on that winsome face, he had found in it a charm his heart was powerless to resist, and he was half subdued already ere she leaned towards him with tender confiding grace, and crossing her hands over his gaunt arm, rested her brow on them, while she murmured in low soft accents—

"I thank my lord that he has turned no deaf ear to the voice of his handmaiden. But enough of this. It is not well that Ninus should be moved by the misconduct of a thoughtless spearman born under an evil star. I have been summoned hastily to his presence. I feared he was ill at ease. Is it overbold of his loving servant to ask what ails my lord the king?"

"Nothing ails me," was the impatient answer; "nothing but the clamour of women's voices and the senseless outcries of priests. I sent for the queen," he added more gently, "because she is the light of mine eyes and the priceless jewel of my treasure-house."

Semiramis rose erect, and bowing her lovely head, stood with her hands crossed in the prescribed attitude of humility

proper for a subject. She knew right well that in no position could she show to more advantage; the pride of her bearing softened, the tender graces of her womanhood enhanced, by its expression of shy compliance, of loving submission to her lord.

"His servant hasted hither," said she, "on the instant the king's command reached her palace. I had scarce time to tire my head and smooth my robes. Yet I would fain look my best and proudest in the sight of my lord the king."

He gazed on her with a fond admiration that was touching to see in that war-worn old face, softening its rugged outlines and bringing into the sunken eyes something of the wistful fidelity with which a dog watches for the smile of its owner.

"Tired by a score of handmaidens," said he, "blazing in a hundred jewels, or dishevelled and disrobed, with her free locks floating to her knees, not the Queen of Heaven herself is to be compared to my queen, fair and matchless to-day as on that bright morning when I saw her ride through the camp like a vision, bow in hand, and granted her the very first boon she asked me, for love of her sweet face and her soft pleading eyes."

"And am I still so fair?" smiled the queen, while a flush of hope, triumph, and pride in conscious beauty deepened the colour on her cheek. "Nay, I shall scarce be brought to believe he is in earnest unless I can prevail on my lord the king to grant me once again the request I lay at his royal feet. If he loves me, surely he will not refuse; and—and I *think* he loves me a little still!"

"I will have him flayed alive who gainsays it!" answered Ninus. "I have ceased to love most things now, from the roar of battle to the bubble of a wine-cup. But may I burn like a log of cedar in the fire of Belus when I cease to love my queen!"

She shot at him one of those glances she could command at will, in which mirth, tenderness, and modesty were blended with the fire of love.

"I believe it," she murmured gently. "Such an affection as ours is written in the stars, and kindles into flame at the first meeting of those who are destined for each other. It seems but yesterday that my lord burst on my sight like Shamash, god of day, rising in splendour on the camp, and I turned my head away to bury my blushing face in my hands, because—because, already I loved him only too well."

With the thrill that vibrated in every fibre of the old king's frame arose the invariable accompaniment of sincere affection—a sense of uncertainty and unworthiness.

"I was a stout warrior then," said he, "and not so uncomely, for one whose life had been spent in saddle and war-chariot; but the colour has faded on my cheek now, and worse, the fire has gone from my spirit like the strength from my limbs."

There was a plaintive ring in the deep hoarse voice, that must have touched any heart, save that of a woman with a purpose in view.

"Not so!" she exclaimed, hanging fondly about him. "Not so, my lord, my love, my hero! I swear by the host of heaven, that to me you are more noble, more kingly, more beautiful now, in the dignity of your past deeds and mature fame, than in all the vehemence and ardour of your impetuous manhood. Nay, my beloved," she added, half playfully, half sadly, while clinging yet closer to his side, "it is not I alone who think so; there were looks shot at my lord as he rode through the streets from the brightest eyes in Babylon, that had I not known full surely I was his only queen and love, would have made me so miserable I had fled straightway to the desert, and never looked on the face of man again."

Is there any age at which the male heart becomes insensible to such flattery? With ebbing life and failing vigour, battered and out-worn by a hundred battles, glorious in the splendour of a hundred victories, the Great King might surely have been above that boyish vanity, which counts for a triumph the empty gain of a woman's fancy; yet Ninus smiled well pleased, and Semiramis felt that her petition was already more than half granted, her game more than half won.

"They know a stout spearman when they see one still," said the old hero proudly, "and they judge by the ruin, doubtless, what the tower must have been in its prime. Well, well, it stood many an assault in its day, and from hosts of many nations, nor thought once of surrender, till my queen here marched in and took possession, with all the honours of war."

"And she has held it since against every woman in the world!" murmured his wife, with another of those resistless glances, and a bright flush. "Is it not so? Keep me not in the agony of suspense. Let me have the king's word for my great happiness, and swear, by the head of Nisroch, to grant me my desire!"

"I must hear first what it is," said the old warrior playfully; but observing the tears start to her eyes, he added in fond haste, "Nay, nay, beloved, the queen's petition shall be granted, whatever it be, even to the half of mine empire."

"It is more than that!" exclaimed Semiramis, with a smile as ready as her tears. "It is the whole empire I desire! I would fain sit in the seat of my lord the king, but only for a day."

Ninus shook his head.

"You are like your boy," said he fondly. "Do you not remember when we took Ninyas for the first time to hunt the lion outside the walls, and the lad must needs ride Samiel, the wild war-horse, that bent to no hand but mine? By the blood of Merodach, he wept like a maid, and I had not the heart to refuse him; but when he was fairly in the saddle the tears soon dried on his cheek, for the horse broke away with him like the wind of the desert, from which he took his name. I tell you, while I stood there dismounted, I must have felt what men call fear! I never knew how I prized the boy, till my horse brought him back to me unhurt. Samiel loved not to be far distant from his lord; and now Samiel is dead, and his rider worn-out, and the queen—what was it the queen asked? That she too should ride a steed she cannot control? Does she know the pride of the Assyrian people, the turbulence of the crowd, the daily clamour for sluices to be opened and granaries unbarred, the craft of the priests, the false witness borne at the seat of judgment, and the weight of the royal word, which may not be recalled?"

But for the last consideration, the heart of Semiramis might have been softened towards one who, with all his crimes and cruelties, had yet been tender and loving in his home. The thought, however, of Sarchedon's doom, ratified and rendered inevitable by those fatal words, "The king hath spoken," swept all other considerations to the winds, and she never looked truer, fairer, fonder than now, while she answered in a tender whisper—

"My lord granted his request to our son at the sight of his wet eyes. Shall he withhold from the mother her soul's desire, because she cannot weep save when she fears to lose her place in the heart of the Great King?"

His head sank on his breast; he was soon weary now, withering, as it seemed, more hopelessly in the confinement of a palace than in the freer atmosphere of a camp.

"Name it," said he—"it is granted: the king hath spoken."

Her eyes blazed with triumph, and the rich crimson mantled in her cheek.

"I have in my possession the signet of the Great King. I ask to keep it until to-morrow at noon."

"I have said it," was the reply. "But what use will my queen make of a toy that has often cumbered my hand more wearily than ever did bridle, spear, or shield?"

"I will but use it to my lord's advantage," answered Semiramis calmly. "Is not to-day the feast of Baal, and shall not the Great King go up at nightfall into the cedar-house on the roof to burn sacrifices, and pour out drink-offerings before his god? There will be long procession of priests, much leaping, howling, and gashing of themselves at the altars; the prophets of the groves too must pass before my lord, bearing earth and water, fir-cones, caskets, gold, frankincense, and gifts. My lord is weary even now. Let him take his rest undisturbed to strengthen him for the tedious labours of the night. Meanwhile I hold the signet of the Great King and his authority. I will provide for the safety of the nation, and for our own."

He was getting drowsy, and his eyes were already half closed.

"You have my signet," he murmured. "Send to Arbaces, and advise with the chief captain for setting of the watch. And that presumptuous spearman"—here he blazed up with an expiring flame—"see that he be led forth at dawn. I have spoken, and he who dared to cross the queen's path must die before the rise of another day."

"Before the rise of another day!" she repeated mechanically; adding, as she gathered her robes about her to depart, "I thank him that his handmaiden hath found favour in his sight. I cover the feet of my lord the king, and I take my leave."

But she turned at the great gate for one last look at the sleeping form, mighty even in its ruin, and formidable in the abandonment of its repose.

Proceeding from the palace, Semiramis paused to whisper a few words in the ear of Arbaces. The chief captain seemed surprised, and even discomposed by the purport of her communication; but there was no appeal from a command backed by the royal signet, and placing her hand, with the jewel in it, against his forehead, he prostrated himself and withdrew. Had he remained, his discomfiture might have been even greater to observe the queen in deep consultation with Assarac, while Sargon, the king's shield-bearer, remained,

as if in waiting, a few paces off. The eunuch's head was erect and his face bright with triumph; he wore the air of a man on the eve of some great enterprise requiring skill, courage, and intellect, but having at the same time perfect confidence in his own power to carry it through.

"Is all ready?" asked Semiramis in a hollow whisper, while her cheek paled, and a strange fire shone in her dark eyes.

"All is ready," answered the priest, in composed and measured accents, as of one who states the details of a duty satisfactorily fulfilled. "Double guards have been placed at the city gates; fifty thousand archers, and as many spearmen, are mustered under arms. Not a strained shaft nor a frayed bow string amongst them, and every man with his hand on his weapon, devoted to the queen's interest for life and death!"

"We shall scarcely need them," was her reply. "I have commanded Arbaces to remove his own especial power without the walls. Has my son gone forth, and have you taken order for bestowing him in safety to-night?"

"A company of spearmen will escort him," said the eunuch, "and will guard the child and its new toy on the road to his refuge at Ascalon. The king's signet will ensure the obedience of such warriors as are required to force the palace of Arbaces, and if the chief captain resist with the strong hand, his blood be on his own head!"

"More slaughter!" exclaimed the queen sorrowfully. "Oh that the road to power were not mired so deep with blood! But it is too late to turn back now. Your life, my own, that poor condemned spearman of the guard—all are at stake to-night; and we must not—we dare not stop. Is Sargon to be trusted? Yonder he stands, waiting for his orders even now."

Assarac glanced to where that warrior was stationed, a few paces off, silent, erect, immovable, with the scowl of undying hatred on his brow. The priest smiled—and the queen thought his smile more fearful than the shield-bearer's frown—while he replied—

"A captive in the dungeon longs for light, and a gourd in the garden for water; but what is their desire to a father's thirst for vengeance on one who has shed the blood of his child?"

CHAPTER XVI

CRUEL AS THE GRAVE

THE queen passed on a few paces without speaking, yet glanced towards Assarac, who walked respectfully at her side, as though she had something of importance on her mind. At last she observed carelessly—

"That spearman who has incurred the displeasure of my lord the king. Is it not the messenger who brought me the royal signet from the camp? These guards are all somewhat alike; yet I seemed to recognise his face as he fell so untowardly at my feet."

"The same," answered Assarac, in his calm unmeaning tones. "A goodly youth, and a stout warrior enough, by name Sarchedon. He has been bestowed in the temple of Baal under my authority, safe at least till nightfall. Nor can he escape, though guard and priest are out of call; for there is no egress from the last chamber in the painted gallery on the upper storey where I have placed him, and whence he could scarcely fly were he to borrow all the wings of Nisroch, whose image stands over against the entrance to his stronghold. But it is not of him I would speak," continued the priest, keenly noting, though he never seemed to raise his eyes above the hem of her garment, the queen's burning cheeks and air of breathless interest. "From sunset to sunrise have I watched and waited for the decree of the Seven Stars, poring over the scroll of fire they unrolled for me, till my brain was giddy and mine eyes were dim. Great Queen, there are no secrets in the future for him who has learned to read the book of heaven. It teaches me that in the darkness of this night shall dawn unclouded glory for the land of Shinar, and supreme empire for her who is fairest and bravest among women. As the goddess Ashtaroth is Queen of Heaven above, so shall the great Semiramis be Queen of Earth below. The Seven Stars have spoken it, and they cannot lie!"

He wondered at her pre-occupation, contrasting with the

attention she had lately shown her present listlessness and apparent indifference to the splendid destiny thus prophesied. Something almost of scorn passed over his brow, while he reflected, that if the mighty engine of ambition failed to move her intellect, he had yet a subtler instrument with which to touch her heart.

Presently she roused herself to ask, "Did the stars promise only that I should be great, or will they permit me also to be happy?"

"The queen's greatness," answered Assarac, "like her beauty, is inseparable from her very being. Her happiness, like the robe that covers it, can be put on or off at will."

"You are right," she exclaimed, while the resolute look he knew so well passed over her beautiful face down to the very chin. "And she who stands panting at a fountain were indeed a fool not to stoop and drink. Tell me, then, their behests. What the stars bid me, that will I do."

"The Great Queen cannot read from the book of heaven so readily as a humble priest, the lowest of her slaves, though this lore, too, will I aspire to teach her at some future time; but there lies in the temple, fairly writ out in the Assyrian character and plain as the flight of an arrow through the air, a scroll that teaches us poor servants of Baal the rudiments of those mysteries into which the ruler of a mighty empire must needs inquire. It is to be found in a secure chamber of the painted gallery under the winged image of Nisroch our god."

While he spoke, not the slightest curl of his lip, the faintest inflection of his voice, betrayed a hidden motive, another meaning from that which the plain straightforward words seemed to convey. Yet the queen glanced very keenly in his face, while she stopped short in her walk and turned towards the temple, observing only—

"It is not yet near sunset. I shall have light to read the scroll."

Then she dismissed Kalmim and her women, desiring that she might be attended only by the priest of Baal, in whose steps, nevertheless, Sargon followed like his shadow. Arrived within the porch of the temple, she gave a great sigh of relief, as though she luxuriated in the refreshing coolness of those spacious halls, with their smooth shining floors, their countless columns, their vast shadowy recesses, that spoke of calm and secrecy and repose. She had not gone far, ere Assarac stopped and prostrated himself at her feet.

"Let not the queen be wroth with the lowest of her

servants," said the wily eunuch, "if he ask permission to be relieved for a brief space from attendance on her person. There is so much to be prepared for the feast of Baal, so many details to arrange for the sacrifice of to-night, that I must neglect my duties no longer. The scroll lies where all who pass may read, and when the Great Queen has studied it enough, if, standing in this spot, she will but clap her hands thus, those shall be within call who can summon me to her presence without delay."

Semiramis frowned, though the frown did but mask a smile.

"It is scarce a royal reception," said she; "nevertheless, be it so. I am content to breathe this cool and grateful air for a space, ere I return with Kalmim and the women to my palace across the river. You are dismissed."

He rose and retired, making a sign to Sargon, who watched his every movement, that caused the shield-bearer to follow him forthwith. Clear of the queen's presence, Assarac pointed to a table on which stood a golden flagon and drinking-cups of the same metal.

"Not even to-day?" said he, while the other shook his head in token of dissent. "Trust me, Sargon, you will be faint and athirst before all is done."

"Not a drop of wine shall cross my lips," answered the shield-bearer in a fierce determined whisper, "till I have dipped my hands in the blood of him who has injured me. I have sworn it by the splendour of Nisroch. It is the oath of the Great King!"

"Is your vengeance, then, so deadly?" asked the eunuch, in a tone of pity that obviously chafed and aggravated the passion it seemed to commiserate. "Surely ten score of sheep, five yoke of oxen, a hundred camel-loads of barley, or a talent of gold should absolve the shedder of blood from further reparation. In our land of Shinar the laws are merciful, and do not exact life for life."

"There is a law in man's heart," replied Sargon, still in the same low concentrated accents, "that sets aside the law of nations and the artificial ordinances of priests. See here," he continued, plucking from his girdle a knotted bow-string, limp and frayed, which he put in the other's hand; "a reader of the stars should be able to tell a simple spearman how many knots on that bit of twisted silk go to the score."

"It needs no great study to perceive that but one is left here now," answered Assarac with an inquiring look into the other's face.

"The bow from which I took that string had been bent many a time in the Great King's service," was the reply; "and a shaft it sped but seldom missed its mark. I have covered Ninus under shield, and defended him with my body, when arrows and javelins were flying thick as the sands of the desert before a south wind. I have waged my life, poured out my blood freely for my lord, and he has rewarded me with his own royal hand."

"He is lavish enough," observed Assarac, "be it gold or stripes, honours or death, that he awards. May the king live for ever!"

"May the king live for ever!" repeated his shield-bearer, "a god among gods, a star in the host of heaven. If an empty throne be waiting for him up yonder, may it soon be filled! When I saw my boy fall stark dead, the blood gushing from his mouth and nostrils, I prostrated myself and did obeisance to the Great King; but I drew that string from my bow, and in it I tied a score of knots, swearing with each a deadly oath, that by the splendour of Nisroch I would be avenged ere the twentieth was undone. Since then I have loosed a knot with every sunrise; and lo, a priest of Baal counts, and tells me there is but one left!"

Beneath its sallow skin a terrible smile rounded the fleshy outlines of the eunuch's face. His voice, however, remained firm while he whispered—

"We understand each other, and there must be no wavering—no escape—no mercy!"

Between his clenched teeth the shield-bearer's answer came in single syllables, hissing like drops of blood on a burning hearth—

"Such wavering as stayed the cruel hand, the deadly bow! Such escape as was afforded that light-footed youth, whom only an arrow's flight could overtake! Such mercy as he showed my boy!"

"Come with me," was the high-priest's reply; and the two ascended a spiral staircase of carved and polished woodwork, leading to the Talar or cedar-chamber on the roof of the temple, where at nightfall sacrifice was to be offered, and drink-offerings poured out in person by the Great King to his Assyrian god. Here they drew from a store-chamber within the wall several bundles of reeds, which they strewed in profusion over the wooden floor of the cedar-house, and which Assarac sprinkled assiduously with a certain fluid from a phial he had kept hidden beneath his gown.

"Every precaution must be taken," observed the priest with another hideous smile. "But if it be the will of his ancestor Ashur to descend for him in a chariot of fire, and these reeds thus saturated should catch the flame, then must the Great King, if he be not overcome with wine and sleep, escape by yonder narrow staircase. His shield-bearer will lie in wait there to help him down."

Sargon nodded, and his white teeth gleamed between the curls of his jetty beard.

"It is a faithful servant who thus risks life with his master," continued the priest. "When a subject approaches the king in his sacred office, the punishment is death."

"Death!" repeated Sargon, and his hand stole to the haft of his two-edged sword, while he burst into a mocking laugh.

Semiramis meantime, left to her own devices, strolled through the long corridors and lofty halls of the temple with wavering steps and slow, that yet bore her nearer and nearer the chamber at the end of the painted gallery, where Sarchedon was lodged. Opposite its entrance stood an eagle-headed figure of Nisroch, with beak and wings of gold. On this the prisoner's eyes were fixed, as he watched the lapse of time by the fading sunlight on its burnished edges, and, looking only for deliverance in the carelessness of the priests, longed for darkness, that he might explore the temple and find for himself some secret passage through which to gain the town. Thus gazing, it was with no assumed start of surprise that he marked the queen's beautiful figure and shining raiment emerge like a vision from under the very shadow of the god; and while he prostrated himself at her feet, he could not forbear covering his eyes with his hands in honest doubt whether he were face to face with a woman of real flesh and blood, or with some illusive creation of his own excited fancy. Perhaps no intentional flattery could have been so grateful to the queen, whose daring nature was yet sufficiently feminine to be tempered with a certain reserve and restraint in the presence of a man she loved.

Semiramis looked tenderly down on the kneeling form at her feet, leaning towards it with the graceful pliancy of the palm-tree as she bends in the evening breeze.

"Rise, Sarchedon," she whispered, dwelling fondly on every syllable of his name as it passed her trembling lips; "this is no time for empty homage and unmeaning form. Know you not that you are to die with to-morrow's dawn?"

Even that hideous prospect, even love for another woman burning at his heart, could not veil the passionate admiration that blazed from his eyes while he looked up in the fairest face beneath the sky.

Meeting his glances, her own kindled into fire. She laid her white hand on his shoulder with a gesture that was almost a caress. But the hand, so firm to draw a bow, to grasp a sceptre, to record a doom, shook like a leaf of the great tamarisk-tree in her own gardens.

"I have come to save you," she continued in a voice that sank lower and lower with her failing breath. "Was I not the cause of your offence? Do I not share your crime? I cannot let you die!"

He scarcely believed his senses. Could this be the royal lady who had ruled so calmly half the nations of the East—this panting, trembling, eager woman, changing colour, mood, and bearing with every throb of her beating heart? It was hard to find voice for the conventional declaration, that "he was the lowest of her servants, and his life lay in the hand of the Great Queen!"

"Your life, Sarchedon," she murmured. "If your life be indeed mine, what more can I desire? See, you shall take it back. It is a free gift; and again I am all alone. A queen, forsooth! Who would be a queen, to burn like Ashtaroth in heaven with fire kindled in her own heart, having none to counsel, none to cherish, none to love?"

He had sprung to his feet. He looked on the beautiful woman standing beside him, and every manly instinct of his nature rose to answer her appeal, so touching, so bewildering, and so fond. The very contrast of her flushed temples and disordered looks with those royal robes of state might have turned a cooler brain, and no consideration of danger or duty could have caused him to forbear exclaiming—

"I have but one desire on earth—to live and die at the queen's feet!"

Never had she bestowed on Ninus, perhaps never even on Menon, the husband of her youth, such a smile as now beamed from eyes and lips and brow on the impulsive warrior, who had scarcely spoken ere something in his inmost heart bade him wish his words unsaid. Her lithe and shapely figure swayed towards him, as if, but for his outstretched arms, it must have fallen. The perfume of her hair surrounded and intoxicated his senses; her breath was on his cheek, her sweet lips scarce a palm's breadth from his ear, while in gasping, broken syllables she murmured—

"Not at her feet, Sarchedon, but at her heart! Nay, more, you shall"—

Had Nisroch descended bodily from his pedestal, or Ninus started up like a ghost from the gaping floor, Semiramis could scarcely have changed so suddenly to the cold impassive rigidity of marble. Following the direction of her stony gaze, Sarchedon beheld, emerging, as it were, from the very pannelling of the chamber, a dark face and armed figure he recognised as those of the shield-bearer. Sargon, returning by a secret passage from strewing reeds on the floor above, had thus unwillingly interrupted an interview which his own instincts told him it was very dangerous to have witnessed. With Oriental readiness, indeed, his countenance assumed an expression of unconscious stolidity; but in his heart he knew that the queen's eye had identified him. And it was too late. Sarchedon, though without a weapon, would have sprung at the intruder, but the queen laid her hand, firm enough now, on his arm.

"It is not time," she said, in accents so unmoved, so pitiless, that they made his blood run cold. "To-morrow, Sarchedon, we meet again here, at the same hour." Then changing her tone to one of the deepest tenderness, added, "I will claim that amulet you wear before the whole of Babylon;" and so, whispering "Farewell," was gone.

When she vanished from his sight, Sarchedon could almost have believed he was mocked by the illusions of a dream.

Ere she left the temple, Semiramis did not fail to clap her hands, and summon Assarac to her presence. With more than usual graciousness, she bade him attend her to the gate, and when beyond the hearing of certain priests who were busied about their usual offices, asked, with a smile "That shield-bearer, Sargon, is a stout warrior, I have heard. Can you depend on him?"

"To the death!" answered the eunuch. "Less will not serve him. He requires blood for blood."

"If the flames do their work, there need be no bloodshed," was the reply. "But of course he must never leave the temple alive."

"Of course," assented Assarac; and so the Great Queen passed calmly on to her own royal dwelling beyond the river.

CHAPTER XVII

THE DIVINING CUP

HIS queen's command, backed by the signet of the Great King himself, was a matter that brooked neither hesitation nor delay; and Arbaces, retiring from the royal presence, reflected with considerable apprehension on the order he had received from Semiramis. Like many other veterans in the Assyrian army, he was devoted, body and soul, to Ninus, reverencing him perhaps less as a monarch than as the famous warrior who had led armies to victory again and again. There is no bond so close as that which is drawn by companionship in privation, danger, and adventure — by a share, however small, in that military glory before which all other fame pales to a wan and feeble light. But between his tried captains and a despotic leader of whose authority there can be no jealousy, as there can be no cavil at his command, exists the community of interests, the mutual and reciprocal confidence of hounds with their huntsman, the wild deer in the mountain with the broad-fronted master stag of the herd.

Arbaces, riding slowly towards his palace, while a score of bearded retainers paced beside his steed, shook his head in grievous doubt and perplexity as to his duty in the present crisis.

"To move without the walls at an hour's notice," thought the old warrior, "that tried host, which has even now marched in, triumphant and well-found in every detail, from a successful campaign; the veterans of Ninus, trained under his own eye in the field, on every man of whom I could depend as on myself, that he would shed his last drop of blood for the glory of the Great King—to leave Babylon at

the mercy of the priests and that gilded army, which professes allegiance only to the queen—thus to place ourselves, weakened and defenceless, in the hands of such men as Assarac and Beladon, crafty intriguers who would shrink from no secret crime, though they would tremble like girls to set a company in array against an open foe—is it right? Is it wise? Is it for the safety of the Great King? It is on my head. I must obey. Yet will I make one effort to save him from himself, even though he consume me in his wrath while I speak with him face to face."

Drawing rein as he came to this conclusion, Arbaces dispatched messengers to the captains of the host, summoning them to meet at his own dwelling with the utmost promptitude; and, turning his horse, rode off at speed towards the palace of the Great King. As he galloped through the wide streets, sitting erect and fair, his golden armour gleaming in the sun, his long beard waving in the wind, many an eye looked after him with glances of respect, admiration, and even regard for the successful warrior, the noted captain, the right hand and counsellor of Ninus himself. Stalwart water-carriers staggering between their jars — tawny fruit-sellers sitting amongst their gourds under booths at the street side—the very leper, grovelling and scraping himself in the dust, had heard of his achievements, and envied rather than grudged him his horses, his wealth, his splendour, his beautiful daughter, and his warlike fame. How could they tell he was risking all these with every stride of his good steed, from a sense of unquestioning loyalty to the grim old monarch, who might put him to death on the spot for entering his presence unrequired? Ninus in the camp was to be accosted by the meanest soldier; Ninus on the seat of judgment turned a willing ear to the lowest of his subjects; but to intrude on Ninus in the palace was a capital offence by royal decree, by the custom of the olden time, and by the laws of the land of Shinar.

Nevertheless, Arbaces waited for no announcement, but flinging his horse's rein to be held by a captain of ten thousand on duty at the gate, strode swiftly through vast halls and shining corridors till he reached the summer chamber of the old monarch's privacy. Two stalwart spearmen at the entrance, guards of his own selection, made way for him with looks of wonder and awe, while the chief captain, desperate as though leaping with lowered point and raised buckler to the breach of a fenced city, dashed headlong into the presence of the Great King. Ninus sprang to

his feet, and once again the light of battle gleamed in his eyes.

"Welcome," he exclaimed, "my trusty servant!—welcome, as the sound of trumpets that bids Assyria charge with chariots and horsemen along the whole line! It can be no light matter, by the beard of Ashur, that brings you thus into my presence. Reach your hand to the sceptre, and out with it, man. Is the city in revolt? Hath Armenia sent us a defiance? Are the rebels of Philistia swarming at the gate? Oh, I am weary, weary to madness of this drowsy inaction! Tell me it is something that shall force me to saddle and war-chariot. Bid me shake a spear under shield once again, or you had better have leaped into the air from the tower of Belus, rather than flown here thus, quivering and aimless, like a random shaft from a wet bow-string!"

Little reassured by the alternative, Arbaces hastened at least to take hold of the royal sceptre, and thus secure himself against the worst consequences of his indiscretion; for pardon was invariably accorded to him for whom the king extended that emblem of sovereignty with his own hand; but he dreaded the old warrior's disappointment to learn there seemed no excuse for a recommencement of the game he loved so well, and it was only because he was a brave man to the core that he looked his lord steadily in the face while he said firmly, but respectfully, "O king, live for ever! I speak not as the lowest of slaves to the highest of masters; I speak as warrior to warrior, as man to man. Arbaces asks Ninus if he has ever deceived him in council, or failed him in the field."

"Never!" exclaimed the king, on whose kindred spirit the other's manly bearing produced such an effect as might have been expected. "Never," he repeated, sitting down again, while the weary look crept over his grey old face. "You have been true to me as the buckle of my belt, the handle of my blade. Old servant, old friend, old comrade, something tells me I shall never tighten one nor draw the other again."

Arbaces burst into tears. The practised warrior, who had seen towns sacked, foes slain, and captives flayed alive without a quiver of sympathy, a throb of pity, was not proof against this unaccustomed mood in his stern old master. Slave as he really was, slave in presence of a fierce and irresponsible despot, his heart filled with a painful, piteous sympathy that unmanned him, and he wept. The king's harsh laugh, covering, it may be, some kinder sentiment than derision, and

hoarse with other weakness besides the cough of age, recalled him to himself.

"Go, get a spindle!" exclaimed Ninus. "Surely, but for that rugged face and grizzled beard, I had believed it was an old woman standing at my footstool with wet eyes to pray for her son's release out of the clutches of Arbaces, rather than the Tartan himself, whom I have seen many a time in haste, anger, and perplexity, but never in sorrow nor in fear."

The other's face brightened with joy and pride; but he had a duty to perform, and neither exultation in his lord's approval, nor dread of his displeasure, would prevent his carrying it out to the end. Assuming the usual attitude of respect, and thus dropping, as it were, to his proper level of humility, the chief captain demanded meekly—

"Is it the king's pleasure to hearken, while the lowest of his servants makes report concerning the ordering of the host, and setting of the night-watches as in the day of battle?"

"What have I to do with the day of battle?" answered the king testily. "This is the day of priests and prophets, sacrifice and drink-offering, waste of time, treasure, and good wine. May Nisroch consume them all to ashes! Day of battle!—by the beard of Nimrod, day of folly rather, and weariness and shame! Thou too must needs come prating about it. Well, say on."

"The whole army of Egypt has been commanded to encamp without the walls," observed the other curtly. "Is this the pleasure of my lord the king?"

"Without the walls!" repeated his angry master. "Who dared give such a fool's order at such a time? And you too: have you thus disposed the host, scattered from their centre, and incapable of concentration or movement? By the belt of Ashur, you are a bolder man than I thought, to come and tell me this!"

"I took my orders from the Great Queen," answered Arbaces, "and she delivered them with the royal signet in her hand."

Ninus calmed down at once, while on his face came the smile that was never seen there, but in the presence of Semiramis, or at the mention of her name.

"It is well," he said. "Had it been any other man in the host but yourself, who came here unbidden to question such an authority, his face had been covered, and his place should have known him no more. The king hath spoken!"

His old heart thrilled while he thought how this unmilitary disposition of his army was but another instance of the queen's

love and care; another proof of her confidence and affection. She would spare him all incitement to exertion by thus withdrawing for a time his favourite occupation, would exact a proof of his trust in thus confiding his personal safety and his kingdom to those who were avowedly at her own disposal. Well, he might not have many more opportunities to please her. Let the queen's fancy be indulged unquestioned, and her commands obeyed. While he dismissed Arbaces, rudely enough it may be, according to his wont, there was yet a rough kindliness underlying the haughty manner and fierce peremptory tones, that caused the chief captain's heart to sink with a sense of depression, a vague foreshadowing of evil he had never felt before. As the subject raised his head, after the usual prostration on leaving his king's presence, the eyes of master and servant met. At the same moment, the same thought seemed to fall like ice on the heart of each, that henceforth neither should look in the other's face again.

Wearily and slowly the chief captain paced back towards his home, the good horse under him partaking, as it seemed, in his rider's discomfiture. It was a sore and saddened heart, contrasting painfully with his elation on the day of triumph, when he rode so proudly beneath its walls, that he now carried through the lofty portals of his palace. He had, however, one consolation left in the presence of his daughter. So long as she remained under his roof, it seemed to her father there was still peace and rest and tranquil happiness at home.

"The girl," said he, with his Oriental turn of thought and expression, "is like a light in the dwelling, a lily in the garden, a fountain in the court."

But his apprehensions were not destined to be relieved by the return of those whom he had sent to summon the principal captains of the host. With the first who prostrated himself before the Tartan while he dismounted came evil tidings, which each successive messenger arrived only to aggravate and confirm.

Ispabara, chief of the spearmen, a tried warrior and leader of repute, had been removed from his command, and cast into prison. Even now the force that hitherto acknowledged his authority was defiling through the great gate to quit the town under another captain. Scarcely was this startling announcement digested when a second breathless runner appeared to say that Sabacon, the captain of the chariots, had been summoned hastily to the presence of the Great Queen, and had not since been heard of. Meantime, the

whole strength of the chariots of iron were already massed in the plain by the Well of Palms.

"What of Belasys and his trusty bowmen?" exclaimed Arbaces in deep concern and perplexity, while a third light-footed youth laid his forehead to the ground ere he made his ill-omened report.

"Let not my lord be wroth," was the deprecating reply. "Belasys cannot be found. The bowmen are in confusion, but Taracus has received orders to command them under the signet of my lord the king, and has marched them out by companies through the different gates of the city. The men of Nineveh refused to move, and were scattered like chaff before the wind by the horsemen of the Great Queen. Dagon! how the blue mantles rode through and through their ranks, piercing, hewing, trampling them down and sparing none! Men say their bow-strings had been cut when they encamped last night by the temple of Baal. The women of Nineveh shall look from their walls in vain, for by the Thirteen Gods I think not a score of that northern band can have escaped alive!"

"And all this on the feast-day," muttered Arbaces, turning into his house with a heavy heart.

It was obvious that some deadly plot had been contrived—some fearful catastrophe was imminent. It needed but little of his warlike experience to remind him that an army thus scattered, while disorganised by a change of leaders, would be useless for all purposes of resistance or offence. Of the queen's object he could form but vague speculations; for the means she had employed to carry it out, he could not repress a sentiment of admiration, considerably dashed with fear. That the authority which devolved on her with the royal signet had been employed to place the city of Babylon, and with it the great Assyrian empire, at her mercy was too apparent; but he hesitated to believe she would use the power she thus owed to his affection, for the destruction of her husband and her king.

Arbaces was a man of energy and action, accustomed to sudden peril, fertile in the resources by which it should be met. But he was also superstitious and a fatalist. It is possible that he might have organised some scheme for the defence of his old master, made some effort to avert the storm that was gathering over the royal head, had it not been for one of those trifling events on which the fate of an empire has sometimes been known to turn.

Exhausted and perplexed, he called for wine almost as he

left the saddle. Ishtar, who had been watching for her father's arrival, sprang joyfully forward and ministered to his wants, bringing him the restoring draught in a golden cup, beautifully carved, chased, and set with precious stones. The girl's step was free and buoyant; her bearing joyous, her sweet face radiant in the light that once in a lifetime glorifies every child of earth with a ray direct from heaven. The sun was setting, and a stream of crimson from its level beams crossed the shining floor beneath her feet. Suddenly she stopped, and looking wildly into the cup, turned pale—pale even in that rich glow of evening, tingeing hands and robe and hair with red.

"O father!" she said, "do not drink. It looks like blood!"

He set the wine down untasted, and covered his eyes with his hands.

"Enough!" he muttered. "Who shall strive against Nisroch, or flee from him who hath the four winds of heaven for his wings? The Seven Stars have spoken, and it is well!"

Then there came on him a great trembling and fear; for he looked on his daughter, and wondered who should protect her when he was gone. His own head, the life of the Great King, the fate of the empire, seemed as nothing compared to the safety of that beloved being—the child of his bosom—the one ewe lamb of his fold!

It was the divining cup of his race from which Ishtar had unwittingly been about to give him to drink, and he would have been as loath to defile his father's tomb, or question his father's honour, as to doubt its gift of prophecy, or make light of the warning it proclaimed. He believed firmly enough that a pure maiden, looking into this mysterious vessel at any crisis of her fate, would there behold reflected, as in a mirror, a presentiment of that good or evil which the future held for her in store. And what had she seen now? By her own confession, to her obvious dismay, a hideous sea of blood!

He dismissed her from his presence gently, kindly, yet with a stern sorrow that forbade her to remonstrate or disobey. Then, alone at last, in the hall of his stately palace, he rent his mantle from hem to hem with a great cry of anguish, and sat down on the bare floor, unnerved, unmanned, in a paroxysm of horror and despair. Above him, grand and imposing in the shadows of coming night, loomed his own sculptured image on the wall—proud, erect, triumphant—

driving at speed in his war-chariot over a field of slain. So darkness gathered round original and likeness: the fierce conqueror helmed and plated, bow in hand—the prostrate figure, with rent garments, bowed in misery to the dust. And the stars came out in golden lustre—mellow, benignant, radiant—smiling down, as it would seem, in peace and goodwill on the sleep of Babylon the Great.

CHAPTER XVIII

A LYING SPIRIT

IN the meantime, not only to his temple had been confined the preparations of his servants for celebrating the festival of the great Assyrian god. Throughout the city, wherever shrine was sculptured or altar reared, garlands had been woven, drink-offerings prepared, droves of animals made ready for sacrifice, and trenches even dug to carry off the blood that was to flow like water with the fall of night. The priests of Baal swarmed in every open space, singing, shouting, gesticulating with frantic leaps, and bare knives brandished to threaten their own naked breasts. Nothing was left undone that could excite the fanaticism of the multitude, and their hot Assyrian blood soon rose to boiling pitch under the wild excitement of the hour. Men's eyes flashed, their cheeks glowed, while they rent the air with cries in honour of their deity, and troops of women, with dishevelled hair and unveiled faces, might be seen beating their breasts, waving their arms, even dancing in grotesque unison with the mystic transports of the priests.

The prophets of the grove, too, had taken possession of every eminence that might boast a leaf of verdure, every green and wooded spot, both within and without the walls, for their comprehensive worship of the host of heaven, figured as it would seem by the countless blossoms and perennial vitality of their sacred tree—typical, it may be, of that which long ago in Eden "stood in the midst of the garden, good for food, pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise;" or that of which he must eat who would live for ever, and which seems to have promised, far back in the buried ages, yet another tree of expiation and suffering, on which the great sacrifice was to be offered—the great sacrifice of immeasurable love and pity, that the sense of man cannot fathom, nor his words describe, nor his narrow heart conceive. In all idolatry, in the darkness of every superstition, however foul and debasing, is there not some faint reflection of that true dawn which shall hereafter brighten into perfect day?

Amongst the crowds that surged and swayed in the main streets of the city, carried away by present enthusiasm, and agape for fresh excitement, might be seen many a proud dark face, with black curled beard and hair, looking calmly, triumphantly, it may be even scornfully, on the seething shifting throng. These faces all bore the same impress of quiet daring and prompt resolve, satisfied to bide the right time patiently, yet ready at any moment to strike the fatal blow. Their haughty looks and stern self-confidence disclosed the temper of that army which, having been left at home to protect the empire during the last campaign, had assumed to itself the title of the Great Queen's host, affecting to take its orders directly from Semiramis, to be at her especial service, and devoted primarily to her interest or person, rather than to the empire or the king.

It needed less knowledge of human nature than was possessed by Assarac to foresee that such a distinction between two such forces, as had now entitled themselves respectively the armies of Egypt and Assyria, was likely to produce feelings of jealousy and rancour, ready at any moment to break out in open hostility. The eunuch, despite attentive study of the stars, had not failed to read that book diligently which closes every page with every passing day, sealed to the curiosity that is fain to anticipate its coming chapters, but standing fairly open for those who would learn the probabilities of the future from the records of the past. He judged men's thoughts less by their deeds than their inclinations, and calculated their future conduct rather from their passions than their interests. It was through his advice that the army of Egypt had been scattered over the surrounding country, and that of Assyria, or the queen's host, concentrated in the city, by timely use of the Great King's signet. With military decision, unexpected perhaps in one whose avocations seemed unwarlike, as his character might have been thought unmanly, he had seized, and caused to be securely guarded, the principal gates of the city, the sluices that dammed its stream, even the tunnel under the great river, which afforded communication between the palaces of the king and queen. He had neglected no precaution; had provided for every emergency; had corrupted one army, disorganised another, maddened the priests, inflamed the multitude, set his snares in the very path of the noble prey he had determined to destroy; and calmly awaited the result.

Beladon looked on his chief with the admiration of a

neophyte for some grand professor of his art. It seemed strange to see one on whom the fate of an empire depended, whose slightest hesitation might involve with his own the ruin of all his supporters, so calm, so confident, so unmoved. Not the careless pleasure-seeking Sethos, whose only business in life was to fill the king's cup, as his chief recreation was to sun himself in Kalmim's eyes, could have seemed less interested in the mighty preparations going forward than was the prime mover and origin of all. Nay, that thoughtless youth did wear some slight air of perplexity on his brow while he crossed the open space between the temple and the royal palace, on his way from the apartments of the prince.

"What is this cloud coming up from the desert now?" said the cup-bearer to the priest, as they met under shadow of the sacred building, and observed, by such of its graduated steps as were still exposed to the scorching glare, that not many hours had yet to pass before night. "The Great King covers his feet in his summer-chamber; the queen tans her fair face and heats her southern blood hurrying to and fro, from palace to temple, from hall to gallery, from the prince's apartments to the royal judgment-seat. Kalmim keeps silence, which is in itself a marvel, shaking her head, as if she knew more than she would tell; while in the midst of these signs and wonders, Ninyas sends and bids me ride with him into the desert in this stifling heat, as a man would say to his friend, 'Brother, you are athirst and an hungered. Here is a melon and a water-jar. I pray you eat and drink.' What does it all mean, I say? The desert forsooth! By the light of Ashtaroth, I never wish to travel the desert again, after the toil and thirst and suffocation of that endless campaign!"

"The prince means to hunt the lion, no doubt," answered Beladon, "under the eyes of Ishtar, or to speak plain, in the light of the rising moon."

Sethos pondered.

"A lion at bay is no pleasant companion," said he, "by moonlight or daylight either. It is not the smile of a fair woman he puts on, I can tell you, when your horse comes up with him, and he begins to look you in the face."

"I know which is most dangerous," replied the priest; "but I doubt if Ninyas feels a wise man's fear for either one or other. Nevertheless, the hunter at night may be a prey before dawn; and the child that cries to its mother for the moon must be pacified ere it wake the household."

"You speak in parables," answered Sethos, yawning, "and during the heat of the day too! I cannot interpret parables, nor do I believe much in priests. Well, at least I am free of the palace for to-night, and have done with the Great King till to-morrow at dawn."

"Till to-morrow at dawn," repeated the other; adding, in a tone of light yet meaning banter, "When the lion turns to bay, Sethos, what is the hunter to do then?"

"He must drive an arrow through the wild beast's heart," was the reply, "unless he likes to sleep in the desert with nothing on but his bones. There is no compromise with the lion: if you slay not him, he will surely slay you."

"He will surely slay you," repeated the other in the same tone. "It is a wise saying, though spoken by the king's cup-bearer. Nay, be not wroth with me, Sethos. I love you well, partly, I think, because you are not over-wise nor thoughtful, and a man may speak with you freely, not stopping to pick his words as if the plain truth would burn his lips. Take my advice: ride your best horse to-day, and water him freely before you mount. When Ninyas comes back from hunting, turn into the desert and gallop for your life."

"Where must I gallop?" asked Sethos, in some natural anxiety and alarm.

"Where?" repeated the priest. "Anywhere but back to Babylon. Ascalon," he added thoughtfully: "perhaps it would be the safest refuge, after all. If you go by the way of the Dark Valley and the Bitter Waters, you might reach it well enough."

"And the Great King's draught at sunrise?" said the cup-bearer, reverting to the first duty of his daily life.

"The Great King's draught is provided for," was the answer. "See, Assarac ascends the steps of the temple. I must prate here no longer. Do as I warned you. Farewell, I am loath to part, for I think we shall never meet again."

Little reassured by so ominous a leave-taking, Sethos hastened to make ready for the expedition to which he had been summoned by the prince. Though greatly perplexed and at a loss how to act, he decided so far to follow his friend's counsel as to select a true-bred steed of the plains on which to accompany Ninyas, permitting the good horse to drink its fill ere the bridle was put in its mouth. He slung also a little bag, containing a handful or two of dates, to his saddle-cloth, and might have completed further preparations

but that he was sent for to attend on his future monarch without delay.

Ninyas was already mounted and impatient to be off. His beautiful young face glowed with excitement, and a fever of longing shone in his eager eyes. Somewhat to the cup-bearer's dismay, he found that he alone was to accompany the prince, though the latter muttered a few indistinct sentences about attendants on foot and horseback, who had been directed to meet them outside the walls; but it struck Sethos, himself no inexperienced hunter, that for one who intended to make war on the king of beasts in his native fastnesses, it would have been well to carry a few more arrows in the quiver, a somewhat stiffer and heavier javelin in the hand.

With his unusual comeliness and graceful bearing, the person of Ninyas was as well known in the streets of Babylon as that of the mother to whom he bore so marvellous a likeness. Recognised and greeted with enthusiastic acclamations as he passed on, his progress through the city was one continued ovation. And Sethos wondered more and more to observe that his young lord selected the most public thoroughfares for their ride, although the absence of his usual guards, the waiving of all state or ceremony, seemed to infer that he wished to depart unnoticed and unknown.

More thoughtful than he had ever been in his life, the cup-bearer followed close on the prince's heels, anxious, silent, and sadly embarrassed by the warning he had lately received. Ninyas, on the contrary, laughed and jested with the crowd, breaking through the habitual reserve that existed between his father's subjects and the royal descendant of the gods with a joyous freedom that sat gracefully enough on one so young, so renowned, and, above all, so fair.

In an open space not a furlong from the gate by which they were about to leave the city, the multitude seemed at its thickest. The prince's horse could scarcely move in a foot's-pace, although those against whom it pressed prostrated themselves to the ground, kissing the body or trappings of the animal, and even the feet of its rider. Much excitement had been caused here by a huge altar of turf raised to Baal, gay in a profusion of flowers, girt with the usual trench, and surrounded by a numerous circle of priests, leaping, shouting, waving their arms in paroxysms of an excitement too unbridled to be wholly feigned. As Ninyas came to a halt almost in their midst, one of these, springing frantically in the air,

caught hold of the prince's bridle, and brandishing a broad curved knife, laid his own breast open with a wild flourish that cut, however, little more than skin deep.

It was a startling figure, standing there so tall and lean, naked to the waist, and bleeding freely from its tawny sinewy chest. The thick black hair and beard were matted together in foul disorder, the piercing eyes rolled and glittered with the light of madness, while a long-drawn howl of mingled agony and triumph denoted that the votary was under the inspiration of his god. Sethos trembled, the horse of Ninyas pawed and snorted while his rider smiled in scorn; but the crowd, swaying to and fro, caught the excitement of the moment, and a whisper running from lip to lip like wildfire rose to a shout of "Prophesy, prophesy! He foams, he writhes! Baal has come down on him! Prophesy, prophesy!" Another gash, a hideous laugh, a long-drawn dismal wail, and that unearthly figure, towering above the rest, hovering as it were with arms extended towards the prince, took up its parable in raving incoherent utterance, while the gleaming teeth and restless features worked in frightful jerks, like the contortions of a man in a fit.

"I am Nerig! I am Zachiah! I am Abitur of the Mountains! I have fought with Merodach, and lain with Ashtaroth, and spoken with Baal face to face! Mine eyes are opened, and I, even I, behold the things of earth and heaven. I am no man, not I, to be born of woman, scorched with fire, slain with steel. I am three devils in one—Nerig, Zachiah, and Abitur of the Mountains—three devils, and yet I cannot lie, for it is not I who speak, but Baal! Baal has come down on me, and cast out the devils, and hereafter will I write them a bill of divorce, that they know me no more; and the voice of Baal cries, 'O king, live for ever!' and the finger of Baal points to this goodly youth, and bids him reach his hand to take the sceptre, draw his girdle to wear the sword; and the fire of Baal falls on my heart and consumes me, constraining me to cry without ceasing, 'To-morrow, and to-morrow, and yet to-morrow!' It is spoke below; it is writ above! O king, live for ever!"

Then the foam flew from his mouth, and he fell on his face, stark and senseless, under the very feet of the prince's horse. Swerving aside in terror, the animal's hoof struck sharp on his defenceless head, and he lay there to all appearance a dead man. But neither amongst his comrades nor the bystanders was an eye turned on him in pity, nor an arm stretched to raise him from the earth. The looks of all

were bent on their future monarch and favourite, now hastening to depart.

As Ninyas disappeared through the city gate, once more a shout went up into the sky; and like the countless birds of morning, with their various notes of welcome to the rising sun, all these voices had but one burden, one chorus, and thus it ran:—

"The gods cannot lie! Baal hath spoken. O king, live for ever!"

CHAPTER XIX

THE FEAST OF BAAL

WITH the last rays of the sinking sun, as its crimson disk went down into the desert, there rose from the echoing temple such a clang of cymbals, such a bray of trumpets, such a wild burst of loud triumphant music, as caused to ring again her hundred brazen gates, and warned Great Babylon, through all her countless palaces, that the sacrifice by fire was now to be perfected before their god, and the sacred feast of Baal consummated with the close of day. At this given signal, thousands of torches flared out on balcony and terrace, innumerable lamps gleamed and twinkled in bower, grove, and garden; while from the beacon-fire that crowned the tower of Belus a thin red flame shot up into the night, like the tongue of an angry serpent reared on end to strike. Far below, in street and square, were massed the eager expectant multitude, their white garments and dark faces brought into strong relief under that fitful glare; while above them, in grand imposing perspective, loomed long avenues of the mighty bulls of granite, with wings unfurled and stately human mien, calm, stern, colossal, types of majesty and strength.

Not a warrior was to be seen; not a bow nor spear, nor so much as the glitter of a headpiece; but every tower at every gate, every stronghold and place of concealment within the walls, swarmed with armed men; while in the paradise that surrounded the palace of the Great Queen was arrayed such force as would have sufficed to sack the whole city in an hour.

Semiramis, dressed in royal robes, with the royal tiara on her head, saw them served with food and wine ere she went down their ranks in person; while every captain of a thousand, for himself and his command, swore fidelity to the queen, to Ninus, to the dynasty of Nimrod, especially to the young prince, who was destined hereafter for the throne of the Great King. In all her varying moods, the present seemed to suit

her best; and many a fierce bowman remembered afterwards how lovely the queen had looked under the shade, as of coming sorrow, that clouded her gentle brow—with how tender a grace she seemed to take leave of each man individually, as if something warned her she was bidding them a last farewell. When she retired into her palace, not one but looked on its walls with something of that sweet sad longing which thrills a lover's heart who gazes on the dwelling of his mistress, on the casket that contains his priceless pearl. But it was whispered in the rank that she had been seen afterwards in the direction of the temple, disguised and unattended, desirous perhaps of witnessing unrecognised the procession and ceremonies in which her sex forbade her to take part.

The pageant began on the very threshold of the Great King's palace, from which Ninus emerged at sundown, arrayed in his royal robes, with the royal tiara round his brows, the royal parasol held above his head. He wore a long flowing garment of silk reaching to his ankles, embroidered in mystic characters, edged with fringes and tassels of gold. Over this a second robe or mantle, trailing behind him, of the sacred violet colour, open in front, and bordered, a palm's-breadth deep, with an edging of gold. His long gaunt arms were bare, save for the shining bracelets that twined like serpents round his mighty wrists. He wore his sword also and two daggers, being the only man armed in the whole procession, except his shield-bearer, who, on the present occasion, in right of his office, bore the state parasol even at night, and was bound to attend his king as far as the upper storey of the temple, on which the Talar was reared, but not a step farther for his life.

Those of his friends who were near enough to observe Sargon's face hardly recognised him. Usually so swarthy, he had now turned deadly pale, and the strong warrior's limbs dragged under him, as if he too, like his worn old master, were closely approaching the end.

Though men cast down their eyes before his splendour, appearing only to study the hem of his garment, they yet knew that the Great King looked very sad and weary; that his feet bore with difficulty that towering frame, which was still so massive a ruin; that the brave old face had grown woefully livid and sunken, the fierce eyes dull and tame and dim. Even the martial spirit of his race seemed to have died within him. But it blazed up yet once more ere it went out for ever. When Assarac, at the head of twenty thousand

priests, prostrated himself in the entrance of the temple, with a welcome, as it were, to his royal visitor, there passed over the Great King's face a light of sudden wrath and scorn.

"To-morrow!" he muttered. "To-morrow! When a fire hath licked up the locusts, mine oxen shall tread out the corn!"

And Assarac, bending low in deepest reverence, heard the implacable threat, accepting it calmly, without a quiver of pity, remorse, or fear.

Shouts louder than any that had preceded them rose from his people as the Assyrian king went up into the temple of his god. He never turned to mark it. The dull listless apathy had come over him again, as if some instinct told him that not thus, amongst odours of incense and oblation, sounds of harp and tabor, lute and viol, in the mellow lustre of festive lamps, gaudy with blazing gems and robes of shining silk, bearing peaceful offerings, surrounded by white-robed priests, should a warrior-king look his last on the nation of warriors he had ruled!

At this point the cymbals clashed in a yet wilder burst of melody; a chant, sweet, measured, and monotonous, was taken up by a thousand practised voices; while in every part of Babylon, where shrine had been adorned or altar raised, torch was laid to fagot, steel to victim; streams of blood filled the new-cut trenches, fumes of sacrifice rose on the evening breeze, loud shrieks and yells went up from his maddened worshippers, while, leaping like demons in the fire and smoke, naked priests of Baal raved and writhed and cut themselves with knives in honour of their god.

One man alone stood looking on unmoved. He was dressed as if for a journey, with a long staff in his hand. His attendants, much interested in the proceedings, held a few asses, large powerful animals of their kind, at a short distance off. It was the Israelite out of the land of Egypt, whom Assarac had released from his bonds, at liberty, and about to depart. He looked very sad and thoughtful; there was less of scorn than pity in his eye, though once, roused, as it appeared, by some unusually intemperate outbreak, a cloud of resentment passed over his face, and he muttered—

"Infinite mercy! Infinite patience! How long, Lord, how long?"

Then he withdrew from the crowd to place himself in the centre of his little band, where, formally and solemnly, he shook the dust from off his feet ere he mounted an ass; and so, followed by his handful of countrymen, proceeded gravely through the southern gate, outward to the desert.

Within the wide area that encircled the temple of Baal, his priests, though so numerous, were drawn out in orderly array that must have gratified the military eye of the Great King. Terrace by terrace the long lines of white stretched in endless perspective, every votary, from bearded patriarch to boy-faced eunuch, with a lotus-flower in his hand. To the image of each deity in turn, as it was borne before the monarch, they prostrated themselves with devout obeisance; while at every prostration clouds of smoke ascended from the altars, golden cups were emptied in drink-offerings, and blood spouted from the throats of fresh victims as sheep and oxen fell prostrate at the propitious moment under one well-directed blow.

Shamash passed on—the god of light, with his burnished disk representing the sun's dazzling surface, and identifying that statue of solid gold, under the weight of which its bearers, tall stalwart priests, seemed to fail and labour; Ishtar too, with her pale reflected beauty, like the moon she typified, gentle sister to the Lord of Day; and Bar and Nebo, versatile, pliant, representations of progress, improvement, human intelligence and skill; Merodach, king of battles, bold, defiant, standing on the lion's back bending his bow; and Ashtaroth, spirit of beauty, love, and light, peerless, radiant, alluring, with the bright star on her forehead and the serpent in her hand. Other images followed, of different minor influences: winged monsters threatening man, or coerced in turn by some superior spirit—the beetle, the scorpion, lions with human faces, wild bulls fighting head to head, or flying from each other heel to heel; Dagon, with more than human beauty to the girdle, foul, hideous in fins and scales below; Ashur too, monarch of the godlike circle; and Baal himself; Nisroch with the eagle's head, the burnished pinions, supreme, all-powerful, immutable, the Destiny from whose award there was no appeal, from whose vengeance no escape. Lastly, the symbolical and mystic representation of some power that must yet be superior even to Fate, some abstract essence, some intelligence infinite, inconceivable, expressed, vaguely enough, by a circle of gold encompassing a wheel of wings. Only on such solemn occasions as the present was this emblem carried in the place of honour, immediately preceding the monarch, when he officiated in the sacred capacity of priest as well as king. It seemed to be regarded with an awestruck reverence by all; and even Ninus, impatient as he was of such ceremonies, believing in little but his queen and his sword, could not forbear a gesture of respect while he

passed beneath it, at the lowest of the steps he was about to ascend into the secluded precincts of the Talar.

Here Assarac, with another prostration, laid at the royal feet a square casket of gold, and a representation of the fir-cone, worked in the same metal, emblematic, as it were, of the two elements, fire and water; the inflammable properties of the fir-cone, with its reproductive vitality, representing the generative powers of heat; while the golden vessel seemed suggestive of that fluid which, pervading all nature and embracing the whole earth, tempering and allaying the ardour of its opposite, may be considered as the feminine influence in creation.

Thus flung down before him, these offerings signified that the Great King in his present capacity assumed vicariously the attributes of Ashur, or even Baal himself. Assarac, with considerable ceremony, now presented a cup of wine, for his sovereign to pour out in drink-offering to the host of heaven so soon as he should have reached the summit of the temple. While Ninus took it from the high-priest's hand another look of immeasurable scorn passed over the old lion face—a look that seemed lost on the eunuch, whose final prostration expressed the deepest homage, the utmost devotion, that could be rendered by a subject to his king.

The southern night had fallen; the stars came out by countless thousands in the calm fathomless sky. Once more, high above trumpet-peal and clash of cymbal, lute and viol, harp and tabor, rose a deafening, heart-stirring shout—irrepressible tribute of honour and admiration for the greatest warrior of a great warlike line. It was the farewell of his Assyrian people to their Assyrian king. While it rang in his dull old ears, and brought the light back to his dim old eyes, the heavy folds of a curtain hanging at the foot of that sacred staircase he alone was privileged to ascend, parted, to close again for ever on the grand old form, noble even in its last decline, and majestic in the very ruin of its decay.

Assarac drew a long breath of relief; and Beladon, at the extremity of one of the lower terraces, whispered to the priest standing next him—

"What think you, brother—will they come down for him to-night in chariots of fire, as it is written in the stars?"

To which the other replied—

"Sacrifices and drink-offerings have been rendered, enough to propitiate a thousand gods; and surely, brother, the stars cannot lie."

But on the face of his people, from which he had never

turned in fear nor scorn, it was the Great King's destiny to look no more. Ascending into the seclusion of the Talar, he had no sooner entered its cedar-house than a strange lethargy and drowsiness enwrapped his senses. Ere he could pour out his drink-offering to the four quarters of heaven, his eyes grew heavy, his perceptions failed, his feet seemed glued amidst the rushes, strewed ankle-deep on the wooden floor, and he sank wearily into the throne prepared for him, like a man overcome with sleep.

He must have been dreaming surely, when in a corner of that chamber, at the level of his feet, he saw a dark face, brought out by a sudden glare of light—a face of which the stern lineaments, familiar surely, yet now so distorted as to be unrecognised, denoted some set purpose unassailable by pity or remorse. In the gleaming eyes, fixed steadfastly on his own, he read a horror that seemed to freeze his blood; but even then in his ghastly trance the stout old heart laughed within him, to acknowledge no sense of fear.

Yes; he must be dreaming. What else could mean these gathering shadows that oppressed his lungs, that smarted in his eyes, that numbed his faculties? He was in a glow of torpid warmth now, conscious but of a heavy drowsiness, broken by leaping flashes of light; while there passed before him, like a spirit floating across a sea of fire, the delicate head, the pale proud face, the matchless beauty of his queen. He stretched his gaunt old arms, he strove to rise, to cry out; but his limbs failed him, his head drooped, his tongue clove to his mouth.

"A dream," he thought again; "surely a dream."

But it was the last dream of the Great King, fallen into that sleep from which he never woke on earth again.

CHAPTER XX

GONE TO THE STARS

BOWED in the dust, his heart torn with anguish, as his mantle was rent from hem to hem, Arbaces grovelled on his chamber floor, blind to the shades of coming night, deaf to the sounds of sacred riot and religious festivity that rang through all the city round. He was like a man in a trance; and yet, though such noises were powerless to rouse his faculties, they woke at once to a distant echo, that his practised ear knew for the tramp of an armed party, to a faint familiar music his fighting instincts warned him was the clink of steel.

With one spring he leaped to his feet, snatched spear and shield from the wall, drew his sword-belt tighter round his loins; and so, with prospect of danger and necessity for action, felt he was a man again. Brave and wary, he ran on to a terrace of his palace which overlooked the court. His heart sank to perceive that it was already filled with spearmen, amongst whom two or three white-robed priests of Baal were conspicuous. Something told him then that his enemies were upon him. Remembering his fidelity to his old warrior lord, and the hostility he had never shrunk from provoking in that monarch's service, he knew, even while he recognised the spearmen as belonging to the queen's army, that some powerful conspiracy was in the ascendant, and he must die. At the same instant came across him the warning that Ishtar had read in his divining cup, under the semblance of blood.

They were in the court; they were crowding to the staircase. The only chance of saving his daughter was to make such a desperate stand before the women's apartments as should give her time to escape by the terrace on the roof to an adjoining dwelling, and thence fly to take refuge. Where? Not in the temple of Baal; not in the palace of Semiramis. No, the last hope of safety must lie under the roof of the Great King.

Most of the retainers were absent, partaking in the

festivities of the night. Half a score or so gathered round him on the stairs, and of these he must despatch one to warn Ishtar that they were assailed. Even in that anxious moment he remembered how, long ago, he had held a pass in Bactria, though sore outnumbered, and the Great King said it was well and bravely done.

They called on him to surrender. They must search his palace, said their leader—one who had formerly been under his own command, whom he recognised as a bold, remorseless, and desperate man.

"You have no authority," replied Arbaces, eager but to gain time, minute by minute. "I am chief captain of all his hosts, under my lord the king."

The other was prompt and resolute enough.

"May the king live for ever!" said he mechanically; adding, in short sharp tones, "Open out, spearmen! Advance, archers, and bend your bows!"

The front rank of spears stepped aside, unmasking a line of bowmen, with every weapon drawn to the arrow's head. To pause was instant death. Arbaces raised his buckler, leaped down the staircase, and dashed into their midst. At first, archers and spearmen gave way before the assault of that practised warrior; but what was one in the midst of scores who had sworn to put him to death? With a gash from temple to chin, with a spear-head in his body, a javelin through his thigh, he fell where he had been lying when they roused him, under the very feet of his own image, sculptured on the wall to celebrate his fame. An arm was raised to strike, the angry steel quivered above his head; nevertheless that threatening spearman had followed Arbaces to victory more than once, and he would have forborne to slay his old leader, had he dared. But a hoarse voice rose, fierce and savage, above the din.

"Strike," it said, "and spare not! Baal hath spoken, and the stars cannot lie!"

The pitiless words came from a priest whose white robes hovered on the skirts of the encounter. They were followed by a downward thrust, a gush of blood, and a hollow groan. Turning on his face to die, Arbaces gasped a few broken syllables. The spearman who slew him, less remorseful now, like a wild beast that has tasted blood, heard them many a night afterwards in his dreams, though they only murmured, "The king hath spoken. O king, live for ever!"

Panting, pale, beside herself with fear, Ishtar had taken refuge, as her father bade, on the roof of the palace, with the

intention of escaping thence into the street. At the very spot where she had met Sarchedon, watched a cloaked figure, and her heart leapt for one wild moment with the thought that the man she loved had dropped from the skies to save her at her need. Ere she could perceive he was not unattended, almost before she was conscious of her illusion, she found her arms pinioned, a shawl cast over her head, and herself borne forcibly away on stalwart shoulders, while a sweet soft voice whispering terms of passionate endearment in her ears, left no doubt as to the object and results of the outrage to which she was exposed.

Blindfold, gagged, half-stifled, she scarcely felt she was carried rapidly down several steps into the street ere she became unconscious. With the fresh air outside the walls, her senses returned, and she knew by its sidelong pace and the rate at which it travelled that she was riding a powerful dromedary, docile as an ox, swift as a courser, and to all appearance no more sensible of fatigue than a boat.

Then a horror of despair came over her; for she felt that those two she loved best in the world must be lost to her for ever. Had Arbaces been alive he would have rescued her. In such a captivity as seemed imminent, how was she ever to set eyes on Sarchedon again? The shawl was still round her head; but its folds had been loosened, so that she might breathe more freely; and she could perceive the soft surface of the desert sand passing beneath her, as she glided on smooth and noiseless like a ghost. Utterly broken down, she bowed her head on her knees in an agony of despair; and still that whisper stole into her ear at intervals, with its hateful protestations of a love she loathed and an admiration she despised.

So she journeyed into the desert, while her father lay dead in the court of his palace, and her lover sought her wildly, hurrying to and fro in a paroxysm of grief and fear.

Once, in an early stage of her fearful journey, she was conscious that the dromedary had been urged to its utmost speed. She fancied, too, that she could distinguish shouts, and other sounds of strife. Muffled and confused, it was fortunate for her that she did not know their cause.

With the first shades of evening, Sarchedon had taken advantage of the darkness to escape. He had no difficulty in finding an egress from the temple of Baal; nor did he meet with any interruption from the priests, who, busied in their several offices, bore without exception an air of considerable excitement and preoccupation. One figure indeed he passed,

So she journeyed into the desert

wrapped in a mantle that completely shrouded face and form, of which there was something feminine in the graceful outlines, though the height was as the height of a man. It never moved, nor seemed aware of his presence, when he glided by, remaining in an attitude of profound meditation, conscious only of its own engrossing train of thought. Could he have seen the beautiful face, so fixed and rigid, behind that veil, could he have read the purpose burning under that gentle brow, he would have fled from the Great Queen in horror and loathing, faster even than he hurried towards Ishtar in anxiety and hope. No sooner was he clear of the temple than his spirits rose, his energy returned, and his project of escaping from Babylon with her he loved while there was yet time grew to a fierce over-mastering desire, like that of a man who is suffocating for the air which is his life.

Hastening to his home, he made ready Merodach for a journey, and bridled the good horse with his own hands; then took his way through the city, now ablaze with innumerable torches and ringing with sounds of festival, towards the palace of Arbaces. But the streets swarmed with revellers, and his progress was necessarily slow. When he arrived at the well-known dwelling, it was too late. The dead body of the chief captain lay stark and grim where it had fallen. The servants had fled, the palace was empty, and Ishtar nowhere to be found.

In such a catastrophe the first impulse of a brave man seems to be one of resistance and defiance, as though his combative instincts were aroused, and he could face his fate more calmly because he feels the worst has come at last. Cool and collected, Sarchedon soon satisfied himself that the woman he loved had been carried away by force from her father's dwelling; and a few cautious questions in the streets enabled him to discover the gate by which she had left the town.

Little by little he learned the maddening truth, and traced her through the gardens and vineyards that surrounded the city walls into the desert. Once on the sand, with a rising moon to help him, he could track the footmarks of her dromedary surely as the bloodhound tracks a wounded deer. He had not travelled many furlongs ere he came up with a small band of wayfarers, plodding on their patient asses into the wilderness, and recognised the Israelite whom Assarac had released, and to whom, during his captivity in the camp of the Assyrians, Sarchedon had himself done more than one slight service.

He reined in his horse, and learnt that a party such as he was in search of had passed them not long before. There were scarce half a score; they were armed; they travelled fast; their horses were of the noblest breed, and the dromedary in their midst seemed to have the wings of the desert wind. Had he not better tarry with his informants where they meant to encamp till morning? He would never overtake those whom he pursued. For the first time that night he smiled while he patted Merodach's neck, and put the good horse into a gallop once more.

Stretching on with that long untiring stride, he was aware of a solitary horseman wandering aimlessly towards him, and riding at a foot's-pace. For all ages it has been a true saying, that he whom one meets in the desert must be friend or foe. Sarchedon bore down on the other, and halting in front of him, discovered, to his great surprise, that it was Sethos.

The cup-bearer, who accompanied Ninyas on his fictitious lion-hunt outside the walls, had taken the earliest opportunity of leaving his young prince, when the latter rode back at sundown to the city. Impressed by the vague warning of Beladon, he had followed as far as he could the advice it accompanied, and turned his horse's head towards the desert, as directed by his friend. But it was not in the nature of Sethos to persevere for any length of time in a course requiring sustained energy or self-denial. The fatigue of the long ride before him soon suggested itself painfully to his mind. Babylon with all her charms allured him irresistibly, now that he had really turned his back on her temptations; Kalmim's dark eyes seemed to plead with his own inclinations against an abandonment of courtly life, an exchange of luxury and pleasure for hardship and privation. It was not long before he guided his willing horse back towards the city, and so, pacing leisurely through the cool night air, came against his friend, galloping in fiery haste on his errand of life and death.

"Have you seen them?" exclaimed Sarchedon, pale, fierce, and breathless. "Shall I catch them? How long have they gone past?"

"Seen what?" asked Sethos in turn, marvelling at the other's disturbed looks and wild imploring eyes.

In a hoarse whisper, in the low, quick accents of a desperate man, Sarchedon briefly described the party of which he was in pursuit.

"If it was daylight, they would be in sight even now," replied the other; and was entering into a long description of

the dromedary's extraordinary speed and powers, which he had not failed to observe, although the little band had passed him at a pace which forbade his identifying those who composed it, when Sarchedon, giving his bridle-reins a shake, went away again in more furious haste than before, neither wishing him farewell, nor thanking him for tidings that seemed so welcome and yet so sad.

"A woman," thought Sethos, nodding sagely, and thinking he would be back with Kalmim by to-morrow's dawn—"a woman must needs be the cause of all this turmoil. Surely there is wormwood with the honey, and a two-edged sword in the scabbard of velvet and gold."

But when did such pithy saws ever preserve a man from foolish deeds? Or where is the armour of proof to fence his heart from a pair of soft eyes, the mantle of wisdom that is not shrivelled to shreds in the breath of a burning sigh? Sethos rode steadily back to Babylon, and Sarchedon galloped on into the desert, like a falcon stooping for its prey.

Piercing as were his eager eyes, sharpened of love and hate and fear, he was aware, by the swelling of Merodach's proud neck and the horse's voluntary increase of speed, that they were nearing the object of pursuit long ere his sight could distinguish certain dusky shadows flying like vapours before him, but looming larger as his gallant war-horse gained on them with every stride.

"Merodach," he muttered, "king of horses, you are worthy of your name!" Then, in husky frantic tones he shrieked out: "Stand, cowards, stand!"

They were within ear-shot, and the dromedary was forced to its utmost speed; but a horseman wheeled round, and halted not a bow-shot from his approaching enemy, supported by a follower, who bore his shield.

"It is a spirit," said the latter; "it is Abitur of the Mountains!"

"Fool, keep your arm down and cover me," replied the other, while, bending his bow behind the buckler, he took a long steady aim.

Swift and straight as Sarchedon dashed in, the arrow flew swifter, straighter yet. It pierced through steel and silk and gold-embroidered baldrick; the very feathers that winged it were draggled red in blood.

Faint, sick, and dizzy, the strickened man lowered himself on his horse's neck, while stars and moon and desert sand spun round him like a wheel. Had not Merodach's instincts

taught him to obey its movements, balancing himself as it were under the swaying body, his rider must have fallen headlong to the earth.

So while the successful archer and his shield-bearer followed their party well pleased, Sarchedon, helpless, senseless, yet cleaving still to the saddle, was carried back at a gallop towards Babylon, over the same ground that he had traversed so gallantly when he bore the signet of Ninus to his queen.

Once more the good horse snorted at an object in his path—snorted and swerved aside, casting his rider heavily to the sand, where lay a framework of gaunt white ribs, with a strip or two of putrid flesh, black and festering on the bones. For a moment the shock brought him to life. While his horse scoured away riderless, Sarchedon was aware, as if in a trance, that he had fallen across a splintered arrow bearing the same mark as that which was drinking his own life-blood: a royal tiara, and the symbol of Semiramis the queen. Ere he closed his eyes again, he saw a sheet of flame quiver in the sky. It flared above the city where his gods had come down in chariots of fire to take back with them the person of the Great King.

CHAPTER XXI

WHO IS MY BROTHER?

ARCHEDON, stretched senseless in the desert, bled so freely, that he must have bled to death but for the sand on which he lay. Its fine particles served to stanch the wound ere life was quite extinct; and though very faint and feeble, the mysterious spark was not so wholly quenched but that a tender hand might nurse it into flame once more. Sadoc and his little band of Israelites, journeying peaceably on, so long as their asses seemed to travel without fatigue, and finding their course through the wilderness by the stars, were about to halt for the night, when they came across the prostrate form of the Assyrian, very white and death-like in the moonlight, lying near the lion's skeleton in their path. Those were patriarchal times, and it was not the nature of a son of Abraham, witnessing such a calamity, to "pass by on the other side." Sadoc was down by the helpless figure in an instant with his hand on its breast, rejoiced to trace the feeble flutterings of its heart. What little skill of surgery he possessed came into practice forthwith. He forced some drops of wine between the clenched teeth; he drew the arrow, and poured oil into the gaping wound; he tore his linen garment into strips for a bandage; and lifting the wounded man on his own beast, walked patiently by its side, until they reached a fitting spot of encampment for the night.

That Sadoc should have been thus journeying in freedom and honour, while his Egyptian fellow-captives were bewailing their bondage in the heart of Babylon, was due to one of

those strokes of policy in which Assarac the eunuch took especial pride.

Ever since her subjection under an Eastern people of wandering and warlike habits, counting their possessions by their flocks, but showing rather the rapacious instincts of the wolf than the meek and gentle nature of those creatures they loved to tend, Egypt had learned to hate, even more than she feared, all races of mankind that lay nearer the Land of Morning than herself. She had not long shaken off the loathed supremacy of the Shepherd Kings ere she employed her new-found strength in making war on the nations of her eastern border — the formidable Philistines, the terrible sons of Anak, and the mighty empire of which Nimrod was the founder, ruled in succession by a line of heroic kings. As her victories increased, so she enlarged her territories, until she became powerful enough to contest with her Assyrian rival the supremacy of the Eastern world. Perhaps that protracted famine, which wasted other countries, and for which the wise and high-minded stranger whom Pharaoh had made his regent provided so skilfully, may have enhanced her relative resources as it weakened her neighbours'; perhaps the balance in which nations are weighed was so adjusted by that Supreme Power, to whom worlds are but as grains of sand, through other means; but it came to pass that the more southern and less warlike people contended with varying success against their ancient enemy; and to proud Assyria the very name of Egypt was as an offence that stunk in her nostrils, a wound that spread and festered in her flesh.

It was a day of triumph, therefore, in great Babylon when her fiery old monarch returned victorious from his Egyptian campaign, and the common multitude rejoiced to tell each other how their hereditary foes had been humbled, how Memphis and Thebes had seen the banners of Ashur flaunting defiance at their gates, his horsemen encompassing their walls; but wiser heads reflected on the small amount of real gain represented by all this glory, of real damage inflicted on the enemy by an invasion that had obtained no concession of dominion, no increase of national power. What were a few herds of cattle, a drove of captives, a heap or two of gold, garments, armour, and common spoil? Like the subsiding of their own river, this ebbing wave of war left, perhaps, increased fertility where it had passed, in the stern lessons of experience learned by those who were honourably worsted in hard-won fight. Egypt was little weaker in

numerical force than when the Great King entered her territories; in skill, confidence, and spirit, she was actually stronger than before.

These considerations were not overlooked by the wisdom of Semiramis; while to Assarac's far-seeing eye, the sapping of Egyptian strength, by every means at home and abroad, seemed the surest and safest policy for the attainment of his one paramount object—the aggrandisement of his country, and through her supremacy, his own.

It did not escape his penetration, that Assyria's great rival was vexed with a sore at her very heart, to prove a constant drain on her resources, an object of daily anxiety and alarm. By a flagrant breach of faith, an unscrupulous desecration of the rites of hospitality, she had converted a race of exiles into a nation of slaves. Those who came to her for bread had indeed received a stone, and the hand she once stretched to them in friendship was now clenched in menace, or fell heavily in blows of tyranny and oppression. As the Israelites increased in numbers, like certain herbs that spring into growth and vitality more profusely, the more they are trampled under foot, the wiser Pharaohs began to realise the danger they incurred. No state, however powerful, could be safe having a numerous race of aliens mixed, yet not mingling, with its native population, strangers in thought, feelings, usages, above all, in creed and worship. They might be tamed with hard work, disheartened by ill-usage, coerced and kept down in every mode that a remorseless policy could suggest, still nothing less than their absorption or extinction could give security to their conquerors; and Providence permitted neither the one nor the other. They lived, a people apart, dogged, unresisting, suffering with but little complaint, yet preserving, apparently for consolation under the bitterest hardships, some strange confidence in their future, some mysterious trust in a Power before which Pharaoh and his bowmen should be swept away like locusts in an east wind. They worked in sad suggestive silence, they earned their morsel of bread with sweat and blood and tears; but they had no voluntary dealings with their task-masters—neither ate nor drank with them, married nor gave in marriage, bought nor sold.

Much of this Assarac had already learned from intercourse with the many strangers who crowded to the great mart of Babylon out of the South; much from his conversation with Sadoc, whom he had liberated, not without a purpose. By the Israelite's narrative, he verified his own information

concerning the captive people, and won the other's confidence in his sympathy with their sufferings, his desire to right them by the unanswerable arguments of sword and spear. His plan, he thought, was not unworthy of his own intellect and the glory of the Great Queen. To send back this venerable Israelite, as an emissary to his countrymen, promising them the powerful aid of Assyria at the time when they should see fit to cast off the Egyptian yoke; exhorting them to rise unanimously from within, while all the force of Ashur pressed on the enemy from without; thus to obtain complete conquest, to extend unbounded dominion over the land of the South; and, finally, when the sway of the Great Queen should extend from the sands of the Libyan desert to the farthest mountains of Armenia, to place this strange people in some district suited to their habits, there to become hewers of wood and drawers of water for the Assyrian nation. What matter? They would have served his purpose, and might be cast aside like a frayed bow-string or the shaft of a broken spear.

But the wily eunuch was perplexed by the coldness with which the Israelite received, while he accepted, these warlike overtures. Sadoc seemed to have but little confidence even in the mighty resources of Assyria; little faith in chariots of iron, and horsemen countless as the sands by the Red Sea.

"Our fathers," said he, "came down into Egypt, directed by the finger of our God. When He thinks fit, He will lead us out of the house of our captivity into a land of corn and wine and oil, where we shall worship Him in freedom, teaching our children, and our children's children, that He only is mighty, and that the gods of the nations are in His sight but as chaff winnowed from the threshing-floor, as smoke from a burnt-offering, that melts into empty air."

Nevertheless, he was satisfied to take with him to his captive people the good tidings of promised assistance at their need, and journeyed back to Egypt, pondering deeply on the prospect of a path to freedom thus opened out by the assurances of a priest of Baal. It was characteristic of the man and of his national habits, that he refused all guard or escort for his long and toilsome journey. His own servants, taken captive at the same time with himself, and a few asses bearing a slender store of water and provisions, formed the whole troop. Thus scarcely half a score of wayfarers gathered round Sarchedon, to preserve him from a lonely death on the desert sand.

Long days the little company plodded on, taking by choice the most frequented route, in order to avoid those

wandering and predatory tribes of the Philistines, whose hand was already against every man, as "every man's hand was against them." But the domestic policy of Semiramis had made her name a terror to these pitiless spoilers; and many a swarthy robber, who would have scorned to quail before the face of Ninus himself, trembled at the ghastly punishments inflicted on his kindred by order of the Great Queen. They believed her—and not entirely without reason—to be omnipotent, omnipresent, beautiful as morning, terrible as the lightning, pitiless as fate.

Wide tracts of desert, therefore, stretching between the different wells and stations that enabled travellers to proceed in a direct course to Egypt, though lonely, were as secure as the main streets of Babylon itself, especially since they had been so recently trodden by the returning army of the Great King. Sadoc's only anxiety was the insufficiency of water on their way; his only apprehension, lest his patient should die ere he could bring him into the land of strangers he was forced to call his home.

It was weary work for the sick man in the wilderness, after he had recovered consciousness and began to regain strength day by day. He had never known before with what force that merciless sun could pour down on his face and hands, with what a glare it could be refracted on his aching eyes. How he sickened for the bright translucent waters of the mirage, though he knew them false and illusive as a dream! How he loathed the protracted crawl, the unbroken sky-line, the palms that promised rest and refreshment, but seemed never a furlong nearer, as he journeyed sadly on! The ass's patient step, the monotonous jingle of its bell, the heat, the thirst, the unvarying interminable sea of sand, the longing for something green, were it but a leaf, a blade of grass, a single bulrush, became almost maddening; and when at noon they halted to fling themselves gladly down in any cubit's-breadth of shade they could find, no palace had ever seemed so commodious, no hangings of silk or velvet so grateful, as the dark lines cast by a clump of slender palm-trees, the protection of some uncovered boulder jutting from the surface to offer repose and shelter—the "shadow of a great rock in a weary land." The Assyrian's constitution, however, was sound, as his frame was strong and agile. Ere he reached the confines of Egypt his health was re-established—he had strength to look his destiny firmly in the face.

The wayfarers rose from their encampment before dawn.

With the first streaks of morning the summits of the mighty Pyramids—already time-honoured records of long-past ages and exhausted dynasties—peered dimly above the horizon. Crossing the frontier, Sadoc pointed them out to his companions, while over his usually gentle brow swept an expression of fierce anger and hate.

"Behold them!" said he—"the monuments and the archives of our masters, detailing like a scroll the history of their cruelties, their iniquities, and their oppressions. I tell you, the mortar that daubs them has been tempered with human blood. Every brick is cemented with tears of women and children, every slab founded on the body and bones of a murdered man. I know their cruelties; for is not my own nation crushed and tortured every hour to complete their like? I know that the Egyptian is without compunction or remorse; that in life he would shrink from no crime, as he would accept any privation, but to secure a palace for his resting-place after death. Vain, frivolous, pleasure-seeking, this people—living but for the empty gratification of the hour, jesting, dancing, posture-making, revelling in wine and flowers—can yet erect for the vile body they are so loath to leave tombs that might contain an army, that shall outlast countless generations of their slavish, tyrannous, blood-thirsty, and luxurious race."

"They are skilful warriors," answered Sarchedon, whose only experience of the Egyptian was under shield; "but they cannot stand against the chariots of Assyria. Why do not your people rise and cast off their yoke?"

The Israelite shook his head.

"Who is to lead us?" said he, "and whither are we to go? Shall we take our little ones in our hand, and wander forth to the wilderness without food, without arms, without flocks and herds, skins of water, beasts of burden, and means of daily life? How shall you conduct a multitude like ours through the desert? Where shall we encamp at night, and whither bend our steps at dawn? If we fled to the south, we should arrive at fathomless rivers, impassable mountains, troops of evil spirits and demons, the servants of Seth and Abitur, if, indeed, our task-masters tell us truth, that the hideous square-eared offspring of the Great Serpent has been expelled to the confines of Ethiopia. Shall we move eastward to be a spoil to the terrible children of Anak and the fierce tribes of Philistia, who live but to slay, ravage, and destroy? Should we seek the land of our fathers, to find it occupied by your own nation—a race of warriors, men of

fierce countenance, worshippers of many gods? No, my son, no. While we remain in Egypt, we have bread, though it be moistened with tears; we have safety of life and limb, though we are subject to outrage, insult, and ignominy; we have a home like the weary ox in the stall, and food like the ass at his master's crib."

"And you can bear it!" exclaimed the fiery Assyrian. "I had rather go out afoot into the desert to die of hunger and thirst with my bow in my hand!"

"We bear it," answered the other gravely, "because of the promise to our father Abraham, in which we believe. We shall not bear it a day longer, when the time comes and the man!"

They were approaching a small cavalcade of Egyptians, journeying in an opposite direction. It consisted of a nobleman and his attendants on some party of pleasure or business. The two principal figures were seated in a light fanciful chariot, gaudily painted, drawn by a pair of desert-born steeds, chestnut and grey. Contrary to the custom of the Assyrians, who usually drove at a gallop, these proceeded at an airy, lofty, trotting pace, their heads borne up, their yoke highly ornamented, and their trappings heavily fringed with scarlet, blue, and gold. In the car sat its lord, accompanied by his charioteer, who held the reins, and attended by some score of servants on foot and horseback—lithe, slender, laughing varlets, fancifully dressed and garlanded with flowers. As this noisy throng approached, the Israelites drew aside to let them pass, halting respectfully, and saluting their present masters with deep humility. The Egyptian lord whirled by with no more notice than a scornful smile; but his people laughed and jeered at the way-worn travellers, mocking their speech and gestures with flippant insolence and scorn.

"Go to," said they, "shepherds and sons of shepherds! Go, seek your straw and burn your bricks! So shall ye build houses and tombs for your masters, and temples for your masters' gods. Shepherds and sons of shepherds, go to!"

Sarchedon's grasp tightened round the tent-pole he carried in his hand. The fiery temper illness had not subdued would soon have broken in on their mirth; but Sadoc's restraining touch was on his shoulder, while the Israelite's grave accents whispered in his ear—

"And these be our masters. Better, indeed, the gripe of the demons or the sword of the Anakim. Better, far better, the iron yoke of Assyria than such degradation as this! How long must we endure—how long?"

CHAPTER XXII

THE HOUSE OF BONDAGE

ADVANCING into Egypt step by step, the slavery of the captive people became more obvious, the tyranny of their task-masters more offensive. The fierce Assyrian could not patiently brook scoff and insult levelled at his companions; but he controlled himself in deference to the wishes of his preserver, and they reached Sadoc's home without any such overt act of violence as would have brought the whole party into trouble.

It was but a miserable hut of mud and reeds, standing a few leagues without the walls of a city which Sarchedon had heretofore visited as a conqueror — a city of palms and palaces, stately in its long avenues of sphinxes, gaudy in the variegated paintings of its brick-built walls, thronged with a dense population, glittering in a profusion of luxury, dedicated to its tutelary deity—the Cat.

Somewhat removed from the bounteous river, on the rise and fall of which depended their fertility and even their existence, the adjacent fields were irrigated with all the skill that science and experience could suggest. Their surface—moistened judiciously by canals, ditches, and water-furrows—was alive with a thousand husbandmen. Hoes were plying, buckets swinging, shrill voices rose on the serene air, and lean arms gesticulated with a vehemence ill-proportioned to the amount of labour accomplished or the importance of the subject discussed. All seemed bustle, plenty, and prosperity, save in the huts of these poor Israelites, that stood apart, types of the loathing in which their inhabitants were held by a people with whom, in the days of famine long ago, their fathers had come to dwell.

Lighting down from his beast, Sadoc bade his guest welcome, somewhat mournfully, to so squalid a home. Then turning to the dark-eyed youth who had run out to take the ass's bridle in his hand, he asked eagerly—

"And the river, my son—how many cubits hath it risen?"

"Fifteen cubits, O my father!" replied the other, bowing himself in reverence, and kissing the hem of the old man's dusty travel-worn skirt.

"Praise be to our God!" ejaculated Sadoc; "we shall not then suffer famine added to hard labour and heavy blows. And thy mother, thy brethren? Is it well with them? Bid them fetch water for his feet, and a morsel of bread to comfort the heart of this stranger, who hath come to abide within our gates."

Whatever might have been wanting in luxuries, Sarchedon found amply made up for by the good-will with which his host's family applied themselves to promote the comfort of their guest. The daughter of the house, a tender little maiden yet far off womanhood, brought water for his feet, and was not to be dissuaded from washing, drying, and chafing them with her own hands. The young men lost no time in choosing from the fold a kid to kill, dress, and set on the table forthwith. Barley-bread was furnished by the mother, with butter, dried locusts, and a piece of wild honey-comb. Fresh water stood to cool in jars of Egyptian earthenware; nor was a skin of good wine wanting to crown the humble meal; for Sadoc was an elder of his people, and a man of mark, even amongst the haughty conquerors by whom they were oppressed.

When it had somewhat warmed his heart, the old man seemed to brace himself for a confession that had weighed on his mind ever since he lifted the wounded Assyrian on his own beast, and resolved to bring him home with him into the land of his captivity. Filling his guest's cup, he bade him observe the shadows of declining day and the crimson of sunset, tingeing the solemn face of a gigantic sphinx in marble, visible from the window of their hut.

"My son," said he, "our people will be called to their tasks at dawn. Not a male of the Israelites must be absent, when the servant of Pharaoh beckons with his whip to count us, family by family, and man by man. Our dwellings are searched, our very sick are summoned. There is but one master who claims precedence of the Egyptian, and his name is Death. My son, it is out of my power to conceal you here. Look around, and satisfy yourself. You must cast in your lot with us, as though you belonged to our people; and I will account for you as an Israelite who has made his escape with me from our captivity in Babylon the Great."

"I would not willingly bring danger on your household," answered Sarchedon, "but I pray you remember that I am

wont to handle bow and spear. My fingers are not skilled to use mattock, hoe, and trowel; my nature, too, does not calmly brook chiding, and refuses altogether to abide blows."

"It is not for long," urged Sadoc. "I beseech you be patient for a little space. The time may come when you shall return to Assyria with the good wishes of a whole nation to speed you on the way."

"It cannot come too soon," answered the other, whose heart was with Ishtar, and whose only hope of recovering some traces of her lay in a speedy return to his own country. "I owe you my life, indeed; and but for you, should have been bleaching in the desert, stripped to the bones by jackal and bird of prey; yet what is life without honour, without liberty, without love?"

"Without faith rather," said Sadoc, grave, sorrowful, and dignified. "The only possession the greedy Egyptian cannot ravish, the only jewel Pharaoh's arm is not long enough to seize—too lofty for his reach, too pure for his diadem, too precious for his throne. My son, there is a something even in the weeping captive's breast that may be greater, nobler, more enduring than the glory of warriors and the pride of kings."

"There are but two motives," answered Sarchedon, "to stir a brave man's heart: the hope of warlike fame, the desire of woman's love."

Sadoc smiled sadly.

"And when the warrior is down in battle," he replied, "or pining in the dungeon—when the woman turns false and cold, or her fair face is fixed in death—what is left then to him whose arm has striven but for his own vain glory, whose worship has turned from the God of his fathers to a creature weaker and lower than himself?"

"A man can always die," answered the Assyrian, "when there is nothing left to live for, as he falls asleep when the sun has gone down into the wilderness. How shall you compel him who has no fear of death?"

"Death!" repeated Sadoc. "And is it, then, so much more dreadful to die than to live? Is rest more terrible than labour, fulness than want, peace than strife? Which is nobler—the courage of resistance or of attack? Which best fulfils the purpose of creation — the ox, plodding obedient to the goad, or the wild ass, spurning control beneath her hoof? I will show you to-morrow a whole people displaying such calm and patient fortitude as shames the proudest

triumphs of Assyria, with her line of kings from Nimrod the Great down to that fierce old warrior whose chariots rolled here, as it seems, but yesterday over a heap of slain, and whose name to-day bids the false Egyptian tremble and turn pale. My son, the hour may yet come when Pharaoh shall be humbled to the dust, and we shall live like brethren with our kindred once more in the land of Shinar—the land of our fathers, the land of our inheritance, and of our hope. In the meantime, though the night has seemed long and weary, morning may be close at hand."

With these words, he spread a couch for his guest, and betook himself to slumber. Sarchedon, looking round the hut, remembered it was of such a shelter he had dreamed, sleeping beneath the tower of Belus, in the temple of the Assyrian god.

It was to hard reality, though, that he woke under the grey morning sky. Company by company, as his host had warned him, family by family, and man by man, the Israelites were summoned to their tasks. As he marched to the scene of labour, between two sons of Sadoc, one a tender stripling, the other a stalwart broad-shouldered youth, shame crimsoned the cheek of the practised warrior, thus to find himself identified with a nation of slaves.

An Egyptian task-master, daintily attired, and mounted on a pure-bred steed of the desert, pranced to and fro, marshalling the band of workmen, threatening, and indeed striking hard with his whip, such as failed to obey his orders, either from weakness of body or inability to comprehend them. The sun was not a palm's-breadth above the horizon ere more than one pair of naked shoulders were already scored with blood. The lash was even raised for an instant over Sarchedon's head, but something in the Assyrian's eye must have altered its direction; for it curled round the massive neck and deep chest of Sadoc's elder son instead, who accepted his stripes with a sullen patience, that denoted some set purpose, some hope of vengeance at no distant date.

"Go to! ye are idle, ye are idle!" was the unceasing reproach of the pitiless Egyptian, while he hurried his gang forward at such a pace as disordered even the light-armed bowmen who formed their guard.

These Sarchedon recognised, by their shields and head-pieces, for a company which had fled before a handful of his own comrades, at the passage of the Nile by the Great King. How strangely the past came back to him!—the fierce

excitement, the restless variety, of war; the royal signet; the ride through the desert; Ishtar's loving face; and the Great Queen's maddening smile. It seemed impossible that he should be trudging on foot a peasant, a prisoner, a slave. Oh for an hour of Merodach!—a bow-shot's start, with the horse's head turned towards home! He would have time, he thought, for one blow at that painted task-master, and so, hurling him to the dust, swing fairly into the saddle, and away!

He was roused from his dreams by the back of his companion's hand significantly touching his own, while it passed a rope into his grasp; and at the same moment a monotonous chorus broke on his ear, to which, while an Egyptian beat time with his hands, each Israelitish labourer lent as much voice as his lungs could spare from the severity of his toil. Their day's work was to move a few cubits on its way the colossal image of Pharaoh, cut from a block of granite, destined to form at some future period the ornament of a tomb, grander, costlier, and more spacious than the palace in which he reigned. Sarchedon, looking upward at the ponderous image, with its long cunning eyes, its grave cruel face, its shapely limbs designed in the harmony of true proportion, could not but admire the resources that had thus hewn a mountain into a statue, and brought it inch by inch over many a weary furlong, to gratify the pride and enhance the glory of a king. Firm, erect, sedentary, its hands spread calmly on its knees, there was something in the very attitude of the giant that suggested power unquestioned, irresponsible, without pity, and without fear.

Levers were employed at every step to raise the weighty mass sufficiently for the insertion of rollers, on which it proceeded wearily, slowly, painfully, yet surely propelled by the efforts of a captive nation, whose straining muscles quivered under the labour, whose blistered hands burned over the cable, whose spirits were broken by slavery, as their backs were torn with stripes, yet whose voices, keeping time with their exertions, swelled a mournful cry in honour of their oppressor:—

"Work, my brother, rest is nigh—
Pharaoh lives for ever!
Beast and bird of earth and sky,
Things that creep and things that fly—
All must labour, all must die;
But Pharaoh lives for ever!

Work, my brother, while 'tis day—
Pharaoh lives for ever!

Rivers waste and wane away,
Marble crumbles down like clay,
Nations dwindle to decay;
But Pharaoh lives for ever!

Work!—it is thy mortal doom—
Pharaoh lives for ever!
Shadows passing through the gloom,
Age to age gives place and room,
Kings go down into the tomb;
But Pharaoh lives for ever!"

The task-master on his spirited little steed was here, there, everywhere; now giving out the words of the chant, to which, dropping his bridle, he clapped his hands in time; now directing a broken lever to be replaced, the position of a roller altered, a hook secured, a rope greased, or a fainting labourer revived by smart application of the lash. The sun was high, the heat suffocating; even Sarchedon, inured to the toils of war, longed for any catastrophe, however dangerous, that might release him from the insupportable hardships of his task.

The sand became softer, the men more fatigued, the ponderous image rocked, wavered, and stood still. In terror of the lash, a simultaneous effort was made, a cable snapped, and some score of Israelites were hurled panting to the earth.

Amongst them fell the younger son of Sadoc, a weakly stripling, whose labour Sarchedon, working between him and his brother, had endeavoured to spare by his own exertions. When the others scrambled to their feet, this lad lay prostrate, too faint to rise. The task-master arrived at the scene of disorder almost as quickly as the casualty took place. His eye glared fiercely on the boy's slender shoulders, bare to the waist; his hand went up to strike; but even while the lash whistled round his head, the Egyptian's wrist was clasped by an iron grip that shook him in the saddle where he sat. Sarchedon's eye looked very fierce and resolute, his arms seemed powerful enough to have torn the threatening horseman limb from limb.

The latter foamed with rage while he struggled to release himself from the Assyrian's grasp. The Israelites gathered round, the guard of bowmen were fairly shut out by the crowd, a thousand tongues clamoured, a thousand eyes glared vengeance, and the mocking colossus looked down on all that turmoil with its eternal, inscrutable smile.

"By the Queen of Heaven, if you move a finger, or speak a syllable, I will strangle you on the spot!" said Sarchedon, in those low distinct tones men use when they mean to waste little more breath on words.

There was enough similitude in their languages for the Egyptian to understand his meaning ; but had it not been so, he could scarce have mistaken the other's attitude and bearing. The oath too, and the man's determined face so close to his own, warned him that this was no Israelitish slave, but one of those formidable enemies from the North, before whom he had seen the choicest of Pharaoh's bowmen turn and flee. What could it mean? What did this stranger in the land of Egypt, naturalised, it would seem, amongst her slaves? This was no time to inquire while those slaves crowded round so wildly, as though eager for an outbreak, of which his life would too surely be the prey. Men learned discretion in the service of the Pharaohs, and though he trembled and turned pale, he did not lose his presence of mind.

"Lift the youth from the ground," said he earnestly, "and take care of him if you be indeed his brother. Bring here water!" he added, raising his voice—"wine, if you have it. Stand off from him, Israelites, and give him air! Make way, there, for the bowmen to bring him help!"

Thus craftily summoning the guards to his assistance, he extricated himself from the perplexity of his position, and ordering the youth's brother to take him home, excused from further labour, resumed the direction of affairs ; but during the rest of the day blows fell less thickly among the Israelites, and the solemn senseless image made a shorter journey than usual towards its final resting-place.

Returning at nightfall to his hut, Sadoc found it surrounded by a company of bowmen. The tale of bricks his family were required to provide for the king's use had been increased one-tenth, and Sarchedon was to be carried into the presence of Pharaoh without delay.

CHAPTER XXIII

PHARAOH ON THE THRONE

TO be carried into the presence of Pharaoh!—words of significant import, suggesting speedy condemnation and summary punishment. With arms strapped tight to his body, with feet bound together under his horse's girth, guarded on either side by mounted bowmen, surrounded by scores of their comrades on horseback and on foot, Sarchedon rode slowly on through the night, and at dawn found himself before the portals of a flourishing town dedicated to the worship of Bubastis, as revealed in the outward semblance of the cat. Here, in one of the noblest cities of his dominions, Pharaoh was administering justice, according to custom. At sunrise the Egyptian king ascended his judgment-seat to dispose without appeal of all cases laid at the royal feet. Therefore had Sarchedon been conducted hither, through the hours of darkness, to receive the award of his crime.

As they neared their destination, the adjacent country began to teem with life. Cows and oxen, speckled, spotted, and ring-streaked, dragged the plough through a lately irrigated soil, the former doing their work far more nimbly than their weightier brothers. Playful calves leaped and frisked behind, marked, like their dams, with the brand of their respective owners. Slender husbandmen, naked to the waist, followed in pairs, scattering seed over that rich and generous surface. Scores of birds from the banks of the neighbouring river followed their movements; while a steward or overseer in every field directed the toil of the labourers, taking account of their expenditure and their stores. Peace and plenty seemed to reign throughout the land, and Sarchedon could not but reflect he might be looking his last on a world of light, life, labour, and prosperity.

Unlike his own Assyrian cities, there were no bowmen on these walls, no guard in this capacious gate, through which all seemed free to pass at will. Two gigantic sphinxes, indeed, couched half a bow-shot apart, kept watch in majestic gravity

on either side. Two colossal idols, cat-headed and of compound form, half man, half monster, faced each other at the entrance; but within, a crowded market, swarming with peasants, glowed in gaudy luscious fragrance of fruit and flowers. A thousand tongues chattered, a thousand arms gesticulated; the ass munched its provender; the sacred stork pushed its long beak at will into woven basket or wicker pannier. Merry faces and broad smiles gleamed in the morning sun. A burst of cymbals rose in the warm serene air, and Pharaoh went up to his golden judgment-seat, the birthplace of those unanswerable decrees that signified life and death.

As his guards hurried Sarchedon along the streets, much interest and curiosity seemed excited by the personal appearance of the prisoner; while comments flew from lip to lip on his stature, his bearing, and the probable punishment of his crime.

"Stately as a sycamore," said one, apparently a carpenter by trade, "and hard as a tamarisk; he will bear inpalement as seasoned wood stands soaking, without a warp. If they keep water from him, my friends, we shall find him alive on the fourth day."

"Impalement!" interrupted an old hag, grandmother to the first speaker; "Pharaoh will never order such a goodly youth to the stake. No, no. Let him be carefully disembowelled; give me a measure of myrrh, a pound or two of cassia, and a handful of spice—I wouldn't ask you for cinnamon, oil of cedar, nor palm-wine—and if he look not as tall and comely a thousand years hence as at this moment, may I never touch salt or natron, iron probe or linen swaddlers, again."

"Fie, mother!" said a good-humoured peasant, emptying a basketful of onions and lentils at the feet of a purchaser. "Pharaoh is merciful, though he lives for ever. The youth may escape with the loss of his shapely nose, or at worst a thousand blows on the soles of his feet. By the talons of our Cat! 'tis a goodly measure of manhood; 'twere pity to make a mummy of it before its time. Why, what hath he done?"

"Ay, what hath he done?" echoed a score of voices, to be answered by a score of extravagant surmises.

He had slain an Israelite! Bah! they would fine him a quarter of wheat, and let him go. He had murdered an Egyptian! It was a hanging matter; but here at Bubastis their dams and banks were raised by working gangs of such

criminals. He would escape with hard labour for life. Not much worse than their own peasant lot, after all. Better, forsooth, in so far that such miscreants paid no taxes, and Pharaoh found them enough to eat. No, it was a blacker business than this. He had insulted a priest; he had blasphemed Athor; he had put his finger in his mouth to ridicule Horus; he had said openly that Osiris was a falsehood and Isis a harlot; he smote Anubis in the muzzle, mocked with feline sounds the majesty of Bubastis; outrage of outrages, spat on the sacred bull itself! He was a spy, a stranger disguised as an Israelite, a Philistine—nay, a child of Seth, with square ears—a worshipper of Abitur in the mountains, a devil, and a son of devils! Away with him! down with him! slay him! tear him limb from limb!

The wave gathered force as it advanced; the popular indignation swelled into ferocity. Instead of merry good-morrows and happy laughter, the air was filled with yell and shriek and wild revengeful howl. Faces, but now smiling in content, were distorted with brutal hate and cruel lust for blood. The crowd surged and swayed through the market-place, leaping, bristling, closing in like wolves about their prey. Could they have reached the Assyrian, he must have been torn to pieces ere he lifted a finger in self-defence. But for those whose trade is war there exists a professional instinct of brotherhood stronger than any prejudices of nationality, any credulity of fanaticism. The bowmen who guarded him recognised in Sarchedon one of their own calling, and made common cause with a warrior, even against their kindred and countrymen vociferating for his blood. With the unerring rapidity of discipline, they formed round their charge in double rank, forcing their way at a steady even tramp through the wavering crowd, and so opening a space on every side, kept it clear by bending their formidable bows.

Advancing thus in a long avenue of colossal sphinxes brightened by the morning sun, they arrived at the entrance of the royal palace. Here, with an infuriated yell, the populace made a final rush; but were beaten back by the archers, at the cost of a few broken heads and bloody faces, though, fortunately for the prisoner, without loss of life or injury to limb.

The judgment-seat of Pharaoh—a throne of solid gold, elevated on twenty-four steps of the same metal above the raised floor on which accusers and accused were stationed face to face—seemed to blaze in a flood of sunlight, that

bathed it from the open sky above. The palace, Sarchedon observed, was built, like those of his own country, round an unroofed court. It differed but little from the dwelling of an Assyrian king in architecture and general plan, but was even more profusely decorated, in a greater variety of sculptures, minutely designed, gaudily coloured, and representing many of the lowest reptiles and animals with a fidelity not entirely pleasing to the eye. Here, besides the fox, the jackal, the porcupine, the lizard, the locust, and the asp, were an infinity of compound monsters, the produce of a theology which persisted in embodying every attribute of its ideal under a form, however grotesque, that should give tangible expression to its idolatry. Such were the winged goat, the serpent-headed lion, the griffin with pinions spread and feathered crest striding over its mysterious triad of flowers, the bitch, dragging her homely chain, hanging her heavy teats, canine in all her properties but her sleek bird's head and delicate beak. Things that creep and things that fly, from the stork and the raven, the crocodile and the ichneumon, to the serpent, the beetle, and the bat, filled every interstice on the variegated walls; while between the crowded figures closely packed hieroglyphics recorded for initiated readers the history, the nature, and the occult signification of each. Deeds of arms too, and field sports, from taking of towns and spearing of the river-horse to numbering of captives and snaring of song-birds, were handed down to future ages in imperishable carving; while, at stately intervals, solemn and majestic, here in the palace of the Pharaohs, towered the statues of those numerous gods in whom Egypt had ever trusted for succour at her need.

Osiris, the great benefactor and founder of their nation, the inventor of agriculture, mechanics, all arts necessary to life; who taught men how to plough the earth and train the vine; who, in his contest with Typhon, the principle of evil, was cut asunder into six-and-twenty pieces; and who, as every true Egyptian firmly believed, would return in his original form at some future epoch to judge and regenerate mankind. Had not Isis yonder, his wife and sister, collected the fragments of his dismembered body to put together and embalm the whole, ere, summoning the high-priest from each of all her temples, she confided to him, and him alone, as she caused him to think, the sacred deposit, so that each carried away what he believed to be the body of his god, under solemn oath that he would never divulge to living man the place of its sepulture, persuaded that his own temple

was the revered and sacred spot? This mighty deity of the future and the past here revealed himself for his worshippers to adore in the massive statue of a bull!

Isis, too, with her ten thousand names, sat in a place of honour over against her lord; and near her Horus, their son, with finger on his lip, emblem of princely modesty and discretion, supported by his half-brother, Anubis, the wise and faithful, with human form and a dog's sagacious head. Multiplied too in many a niche and along many a lofty corridor, stood erect and threatening the figure of that deity to whom the city was especially sacred, worshipped under the semblance of a cat. Avenues of cat-headed monsters kept watch in hall and passage; while presiding, as it were, in the very entrance of the court, stood a gigantic image of granite, wearing the short ears of the sacred animal, its sleek round head, and cruel feline smile.

Immediately behind this dazzling throne, constituting it indeed the very tribunal of the Pharaohs, watching, as men believed, over sentence and acquittal, accuser and accused, might be seen the statue of a female figure, with blinded eyes, serene impassive face, and wings spread out in front, as though grasping and embracing all within their sweep. This was Thmei, emblematic goddess of truth and justice, whose essential attributes were thus typified in her outward form: the blinded eyes signifying her impartiality, the calm visage her indifference to consequences, the wings instead of hands her incorruptible nature, inaccessible to the bribes it was impossible for her to accept.

Standing between his guards, still pinioned and secured, Sarchedon's eye took in all these details of Pharaoh's sumptuous palace ere the glare of burnished gold permitted him to observe the judgment-seat and its occupant. After a time, however, he was able to distinguish the person of a pale slender sallow man, showing like the wick of a lighted candle through a blaze of shining raiment, dazzling jewels, and royal Egyptian state. Pharaoh's attitude was one of extreme exhaustion and fatigue; his face looked very sad and weary, but in its long narrow eyes, low brow, and prominent chin there lurked a strange resemblance to the pitiless features of that colossal figure which was destined hereafter to keep watch over his tomb.

A case had just been disposed of, trifling, indeed, in its details, and scarcely worth the intervention of a monarch; but it was the custom of Egypt, that wherever Pharaoh held his court, he should administer justice in person, from the

pilfering of a handful of lentils to desecration of an idol, blasphemy against a god, or resistance to the authority of the king. A dozen strokes of the bastinado had been awarded for the first offence. Sarchedon, accused of the last, was brought forward by the archers, and placed at the lowest step of the throne.

"Unbind him," said Pharaoh, looking round on his men of war with something of scorn. Then, in the prisoner's own dialect, he addressed him shortly and sternly: "You are an Assyrian. What do you here?"

The tone was of one who had never known opposition, and the keen dark eye wandered over Sarchedon from head to foot with something of the cat's expression, pausing carelessly before she makes up her mind to pounce.

"My life is in the hand of Pharaoh," answered the prisoner. "I will not deny my nation nor my name."

"What brought you into Egypt?" continued the king, still in the same scornful, indifferent accents. "Have you any knowledge of my country and its customs?"

"I came here first as a conqueror," answered the haughty Assyrian. "It was not for *us* to learn the manners and customs of the Egyptians, but to impose on them our own."

The guards, who understood him passably well, exchanged looks of consternation at this imprudent reply; but something like a smile crossed Pharaoh's face, and sinking back into the throne, he observed carelessly—

"Let his accusation be read out."

It was the law of Egypt that, even in presence of the supreme authority, all judicial proceedings should be reduced to a written statement, comprising the charge, the evidence on both sides, and the defence. It was believed that thus only could be avoided the bias of skilful oratory and impassioned eloquence, where an offender was pleading for his life.

A priest — distinguished by gravity of demeanour and wisdom of aspect no less than by the purity of his linen garments and the reverence he seemed to command from the bystanders—now read from a roll of papyrus the terms of the accusation with which the prisoner stood charged. It set forth in simple language that "he, this Assyrian stranger, having come surreptitiously into the land of Egypt, had there consorted, of his own free will, with their slaves the Israelites, tampering with their patriarchs, and inciting that stiff-necked people to revolt; that he had even headed the outbreak of a

gang during a temporary respite from their labours—an indulgence, it added, which ought never to have been permitted by the task-master; had hurled that functionary from the saddle, and well-nigh slain him while bleeding and helpless on the ground; that such an enormity was in itself an insult to the majesty of the king, an outrage on the Egyptian nation, and a crime only to be expiated by death. He laid his charge at the feet of Pharaoh, who, like Thmei, was the embodiment of truth, justice, and wisdom, and who would live in power and glory for ever."

From out the blaze of splendour flaming round the throne came again that calm and scornful voice, wearily enunciating the usual formula—

"Produce your witnesses."

Two or three archers belonging to the force that had guarded the working gang of Israelites here stepped forward, and with them, to the prisoner's consternation, the younger son of Sadoc—that fragile boy, in whose defence he had brought down the wrath of Egypt on his own head.

The poor youth had been on horseback since nightfall. Unaccustomed, like his nation in general, to the exercise of riding, he was a pitiable object of soreness, fatigue, perplexity, and alarm. The archers gave their evidence clearly enough. It amounted to little more than the bare facts of the case. Then they dragged the young Israelite into the terrible presence of Pharaoh, pale and faint with mortal fear.

"What needs all this weight of testimony?" exclaimed the prisoner in a loud bold voice. "It is but heaping weariness and vexation on the head of my lord the king. I deny that I have urged a nation to rebel against its rulers. I admit that I opposed by force the violence that would have scourged a helpless child lying in the dust. If this be deadly crime by the laws of Egypt, would that we had given you a milder code when the children of Ashur came of late to seek you with bow and spear. I have spoken. My life is in Pharaoh's hands. Let him take it how and when he will."

The king looked round on his captains and counsellors with a passing gleam of animation in his eyes.

"This is a bold fellow," said he. "Which of you would dare speak thus, while looking death in the face so close?"

Nobody answered; but a murmur went round the circle, to the effect that "Pharaoh lived for ever!" The king turned to a venerable man who, with the exception of that indispensable official the fan-bearer, stood nearest the throne, and asked him—

"Have these sons of shepherds been numbered according to the royal decree?"

"The king hath spoken," was the subservient reply, while with a low obeisance a roll of papyrus was laid at the royal feet.

The fan-bearer handed it to his lord, who scanned it with an angry frown.

"So many!" muttered Pharaoh; "and so poor a tale of work! Increasing, multiplying, swarming over the land, while they lay it waste like locusts! Sleeping more than they labour, devouring more than they produce, hoarding substance, no doubt, and having children at their desire. Is Pharaoh's arm shortened, or has my hand waxed faint? I must take order with this scum of nations, lest at last they outnumber us, spreading through the land to eat it away like a sore. I have reached to them the sceptre of my protection; it is time they should feel the edge of my wrath!"

Round the king's neck hung a small image in gold of Thmei, goddess of Truth, corresponding in every respect with the statue that towered above his throne. A similar ornament glittered on the breast of the old man whom he addressed, denoting the regent of his kingdom, a magnate second only in power to Pharaoh himself. When such an official possessed the wisdom and courage to oppose the royal decree, for the king's own welfare and that of his people, his granaries were full, his subjects prospered, and, to use their own expression, "the land sung for joy." Too often, however, he was only the echo of his lord.

"The breath of Pharaoh's nostrils shall consume them," was his answer to the king's outbreak, "even as the wind sweepeth a plague of locusts into the sea."

Again the evil smile passed across that weary sallow face. Sensual, selfish, and indolent as was the great ruler of the South, he had yet the political wisdom that foresees a crisis, the subtlety that prevents it, and the resolution that opposes it when it comes. His smile, while it boded no good to the children of Israel, indicated at the same time that he considered his regent an imbecile old man. The facts of the case now laid before him had been detailed to his private ear long before he ascended the judgment-seat, and had been discussed with one of his confidential advisers; a magician of no mean repute, whose keen intellect and scientific knowledge influenced his lord no less than did the startling resources of his art. This trusted counsellor had pointed out to Pharaoh the impolicy of permitting one of the Assyrian nation to

remain amongst a people—situated in their very midst—whose increasing prosperity tyranny and oppression seemed powerless to keep down; and the king recognised in the bold outspoken prisoner now before him such a leader as the Israelites might be glad to obey, should they determine on a general rising to cast off the Egyptian yoke. True, they had neither arms nor horses nor war-chariots of iron; but they were formidable nevertheless in their numbers, their organisation, and their dogged persistence in some strange inscrutable belief. Pharaoh resolved to find out more of this stranger from the enemy's country ere he let him slip through his grasp either by acquittal or condemnation to death. Assuming, therefore, an air of rigid impartiality, the king turned to the Israelitish lad, whose terror caused him, as it were, to wither and shrink under the royal eye.

"You have resisted authority," said Pharaoh, "and created a tumult; but you are young, and the king is merciful. Take him back to his dwelling-place," he added sternly to the archers; "scourge him, and let him go."

Then, while the lad, more dead than alive—dreading, perhaps, his weary ride homeward fully as much as the subsequent punishment—was led away between two bowmen, the king once more addressed himself to Sarchedon—

"Assyrian," said he, "your crime, according to our law, must be punished by impalement. Nevertheless, while I inquire further into your case, I grant you a few days' respite before you die. Remove him, and put him in safe ward. Pharaoh has spoken."

The deep response, "Pharaoh lives for ever!" rose from every quarter of the court, and Sarchedon was hurried out of the royal presence, even as a ragged old peasant hobbled into it to demand justice on his neighbour, who had robbed him of a string of onions and a half-emptied gourd.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE CAPTIVE IN THE DUNGEON

A CERTAIN rough sympathy for his impending fate seemed elicited from his guards, as they forced Sarchedon through the palace, down a dark passage, bricked and vaulted, that led to some remote place of security, unvisited by the light of day.

"You should have held your peace, man," said one, easing a little the belt that bound the prisoner's arms. "To bandy words with Pharaoh is to throw scalding broth in the air, and stand under where it falls. Had you feigned to be stricken dumb with fear, now, not daring to raise your eyes in the face of my lord the king, you might have escaped with the loss of your nose and tenscore stripes on the soles of your feet. But that long tongue of yours has made it a hanging matter, believe me—no less—if not impalement, which is worse."

"Tush, brother!" interrupted his comrade, a comely archer, not unconscious of his sleek dark locks, marked brows, and other personal advantages; "a man can die but once. Better be stuffed and swathed decently in a large cool resting-place, with plenty of room and shade, than limp about in the heat a hideous object, crippled and disfigured for life."

"A man can die but once," repeated Sarchedon stoutly, repressing the shudder that, in this dark downward passage, chilled him to the bone. "I had hoped, however, to fall honourably from my war-chariot in the forefront of battle, rather than hang by the heels like a trapped jackal, to rot and blacken, till my bones are stripped by the birds of prey."

"What matter?" observed the first speaker, accepting with resignation the misfortunes of another. "Men come to the same resting-place, travel the road how they will. Even the Great Sphinxes and the three royal tombs must crumble down at last. It is only Pharaoh who lives for ever."

Thus speaking, he thrust a bunch of onions and a lump of barley-bread into Sarchedon's hands, unbinding them at the same moment while dexterously pushing him through a door, which he shut and bolted on the outside, leaving his own homely meal with the prisoner, whom he thus consigned to solitude and gloom.

The Assyrian listened to the retiring footsteps of his escort as a man hanging over an abyss marks the last strands parting of a rope that links him to life and light of day. When they faded into silence, he seemed to taste already the bitterness of death. Unlike the Egyptian, however, that fatalism which sinks without effort to despair was no part of the Assyrian's character, and he soon roused himself to examine the strength and quality of his prison-house. It was a cell of liberal dimensions, sunk deep into the earth, bricked throughout and with vaulted roof, admitting a feeble glimmer from one narrow loophole, which communicated with the passage he had left. The more minutely he studied it, the more convinced was he that his dungeon afforded no chance of escape. He felt the walls on each side, not leaving a single brick untouched; he searched the flooring carefully for some inequality that might give hope of a subterranean passage or concealed egress; but in vain. The work seemed even and level, smooth as granite, and no more to be tampered with than the pitiless rock itself. Wearied at length with his exertions, his ride through the night, and the events of the morning, he made up his mind to die, and in the meantime munched his barley-bread and onions ere he laid him down to sleep.

It seemed that he had scarcely rested an hour before the door of his cell was opened, to be shut again ere he could spring to his feet. Food and wine, however, of the best quality had been left for his refreshment, and to these he did justice, notwithstanding the exigencies of his situation and the prospect of a painful death.

So the time dragged wearily on, the faint streak of light that stole into his dungeon affording the prisoner no means of calculating the days as they passed by. His meals, though served regularly, were brought by a shrouded figure that vanished, phantom-like, before he could accost it. No sound from upper earth penetrated these gloomy regions. It seemed to Sarchedon that he was forgotten of men, and, as he somewhat bitterly reflected, deserted by the gods. Could Baal not see him here, sunk surely but a fathom deep below the surface—Baal, in whose service he had so often drawn bow

and brandished spear? Nor Ashtaroth, lovely Queen of Light, to whom, young, comely, gallant, he had tendered an adoration not unmixed with something of poetry and romance? Nor any of the Great Thirteen, wheeling aloft in their golden cars? Nor one amongst the countless host of heaven? Was this the reward they vouchsafed their worshipper? and would that other God, of whom Sadoc spoke, have left him thus to die? He summoned all his manhood, and it failed him; he drew on his courage, and found it but a dogged form of despair. He felt the want of something to lean on, something to trust in, something to help him from without, like a blind man seeking a friendly grasp to guide his steps. He wished he had questioned the Israelite more minutely as to that mysterious creed of his, which taught men they could never be alone nor friendless; that present with them always, but nearest at their greatest need, was a power unseen, unheard, tender, compassionate, yet irresistible and superior to fate.

Alas, it was too late now! He turned to the wall, with something of hopeless apathy, and fell to thinking of Ishtar, fingering the while that amulet round his neck which had clung to him through all his troubles, and in which he put some vague superstitious trust. He felt persuaded it was mysteriously interwoven with his destiny; and if this charm too had played him false, like all else, it must be time to die, since he was indeed ruined and undone.

Thus pondering, he started fiercely to his feet; for in an instant the whole cell seemed ablaze with light, not on fire, but glowing in a mild yellow lustre, which faded back to gloom ere his dazzled eyes could distinguish more than the outline of a shrouded figure standing in the midst. Some wild hope shot through his heart that it might be the phantom of his love come to bid him farewell; but a moment later he remembered his sentence, and prepared to confront a messenger from Pharaoh, sent doubtless for the purpose of leading him forth to die.

"I am ready," said the prisoner sternly. "I might strangle you where you stand, before you could summon help; but what would that avail me? You are but doing your duty. Lead on. 'Tis almost worth a life to see daylight once more."

"Life is dear," was the answer, "to the reptile in the mud, no less than to the eagle in the sky. It should be doubly dear to a man of war, who is the bulwark of a host and the favourite of a prince."

Sarchedon started, and looked piercingly at the speaker, whose voice, calm, low, and grave, seemed not entirely strange to his ear; but the cell had again become so dark, he could make out no more than a cloaked form and closely muffled face.

"What mean you?" said he. "Did Pharaoh send you here to jest with me before I die?"

"I am indeed sent by Pharaoh," was the answer; "Pharaoh, who, through my lore, can read events passing at Nineveh, at Babylon, at Thebes and Memphis, clearly as here in the City of the Cat. Have you never heard, my son, of the magic of the Egyptians?"

"I have heard of it," replied the outspoken warrior. "But my experience of your people is at bow-shot distance, and more than once at point of spear. They are skilful marksmen, I tell you fairly, and sturdy men of war enough with push of steel. They needed but little magic to help them when it came to downright blows. Yet we drove them before us, we sons of Ashur, as the lion drives the wild ass across the plain."

"The wild ass may yet spurn the lion with her hoof," answered the other. "But what are sword and spear and human might to those forces we can summon from the world of spirits at our will? Would you not tremble, my son, to behold Typhon or Abitur of the Mountains standing here on the floor between you and me?"

"Seeing is believing," was the reply of the stout-hearted Assyrian.

"I will not test your courage so far," said his visitor; "the more that I know it true as the steel you ought to wear on your thigh even now. Nor would I dare to summon such powerful aid as those I have named except at utmost need, or by the desire of Pharaoh himself. Nevertheless, I will show you here on the spot such manifestations of my power as will put to shame all the lore acquired from your lofty towers or your wide Northern plains. Which of your star-readers will bid this dry rod blossom like the almond-tree, or cause a fresh lotus to spring up in flower from the arid soil of that cemented brickwork beneath our feet?"

While he spoke, the same glow as before, though somewhat milder in lustre, shone through the cell, revealing to the astonished prisoner a slender figure draped up to the keen black eyes, that never seemed to leave his own. The magician, if such he were, looked imposing neither in gravity of age nor majesty of stature; yet Sarchedon felt a strange

consciousness that he was in the presence of one superior to himself. He watched with eager curiosity every motion of his visitor, who brought out from beneath his robe a lamp of transparent glass, traced with mystic characters in waving lines of gold, and which shed the radiance that had so startled the Assyrian. Over the lamp he brandished a rod some two cubits long, apparently of polished ebony; and immediately a cloud of aromatic vapour filled the cell, hiding him for a space from the prisoner's sight. When it cleared away, he reached to Sarchedon the branch of an almond-tree, equal in length to the rod he had carried in his hand, green, full of sap, and fragrant in a rich growth of blossoms bursting into flower.

"The warrior can take life," said he gravely, "and the king can level fenced cities with the plain. Is not he greater than king and warrior who can call into existence that which these have only power to destroy?"

Sarchedon gazed on him in mute astonishment and awe. That the magician should have thus appeared in a dungeon of which the walls denoted no possibility for secret entrance was of itself surprising enough; but to inhale its fragrance, and behold in luxuriant blossom that which his own eyes had told him was but now a dry rod of ebony, could only be accounted for by supernatural influences; and he became a firm believer in magic forthwith. He made a last stand, however, for his incredulity, exclaiming almost unconsciously—

"You must have brought it beneath your cloak."

There was something of the kindly patience with which one instructs a child in the other's tone, while he replied—

"Seeing is indeed believing, as you even now averred. See, then, my son, and believe!"

With that, he cast his mantle from his shoulders, and stood forth erect, letting its folds wind about his feet, and showing in the pure white robe that enveloped his person like a pillar of alabaster on a black pedestal. His features were still shrouded; but his eyes gleamed with a mocking fire. Once more, while he passed his hand over the lamp, a cloud obscured the dungeon as before, but for a somewhat longer space. When it cleared away, he lifted his dark cloak from the floor, and there at the prisoner's very feet, springing, as it seemed, from the hard brickwork, bloomed a fresh lotus, the flower that every son of Ashur deemed specially sacred to his country and his gods.

Sarchedon was a brave man in battle; braver, indeed, than the average of his countrymen, whose courage, perhaps,

was their noblest quality. Had a score of Pharaoh's archers been bending bows all round him, he would have died like a lion in their midst, without a sign of weakness or fear; but it was no part of his creed to set at defiance the powers of another world, and he fell prostrate before his visitor in abject humility, covering his face with his hands.

CHAPTER XXV

THE WISDOM OF THE EGYPTIANS

THE magician raised him kindly, tempered to a pale mild light the lamp he had set down, and wrapping his cloak around him as before, fixed his eyes on the prisoner with that calm scrutinising gaze which had dominated the fiery spirit of the warrior from the first.

"Have no fear," said he. "I came not hither through the solid earth that I might destroy you, or I had created but now the greedy monster of the river, the deadly serpent of the brake, rather than a fruitful branch from our Egyptian orchards and the sacred flower of your own Assyrian plains. Is it enough? or shall I show you here in this deep dark cell greater and more terrible examples of my power?"

"No more, my lord!" answered the Assyrian, who felt his courage, though beginning to reassert itself, unequal to further trials of a like nature. "No more, I entreat you; for although I fear not mortal enemies, I have no wish to meet the sons of Seth in all the terrors they bring with them from the south; nor has Baal befriended me so stoutly, that I would trust to his assistance in an encounter with Abitur face to face."

"Blaspheme not Baal!" was the sarcastic reply. "Think you that he can see down into the earth from his seat up yonder amongst the stars, or that he would deign to aid you if he could? Has he not votaries by tens of thousands in great Babylon, who offer him daily their goods, their blood, their lives? Has he ever descended to his temple for one of them, or made the least sign that he could taste the savour of their sacrifices, could hear their prayers, take note of their

outcries and their wounds? Will Ashtaroth give you light in your dungeon, Nebo come to release you from captivity, Dagon bring you to eat and drink, or Shamash himself show pity while you are writhing under his very eyes on the stake? These are your gods, O Assyrian! And you can venture to compare them with ours—with Thmei, of eternal truth and justice; with Osiris, benefactor and regenerator of earth and heaven; with wise Anubis, and subtle Thoth, and Isis, fertile, lavish, glorious in her ten thousand names!"

"There are gods enough in both countries," answered Sarchedon; "and I have heard the Great King swear by them all, that it was strange out of so large a host he had never set eyes on a straggler yet. But I have not heard of Assyrian priest, I tell you frankly, who can claim such dominion over the powers of nature as you showed me even now."

"And you think a man had better force Abitur to do his bidding than implore succour from Baal in vain?" said the other, with a sneer.

"Why not?" was the reply. "I carried a spear already in his royal guard when Semiramis persuaded the Great King to rear an altar for the worship of Abitur in the mountains beyond old Nineveh. It crossed him sore; for he never endured such ceremonies with patience, complaining that he could feed a score of companies with fewer bullocks than were slain to satisfy one single god. But the queen's eyes have power in them to draw men whither she will, and Ninus would do her bidding readily as the humblest archer in the host. So we marched up into the mountains at midnight, every man with bow and spear, axe and mattock. Plane, cedar, and broad-leafed oak fell by scores under so many willing arms, while the stoutest spearmen raised a lofty altar, and dug deep trenches to carry off the blood, bringing in bullocks and sheep for slaughter, that we had driven up with no small trouble from the plains. Ere long we built up such a fire that the watchmen on the walls of Nineveh proclaimed the mountain was ablaze; and when the burnt-offerings were made ready, there rose such a smoke that the gods could have seen but little of what we, their servants, were about beneath it. Perhaps it was too thick even for him to penetrate, whom we went there to honour. I know the Great King's wrath was kindled; for he caught up spear and shield, bidding the demon come out if he dared, and speak with him face to face."

"Did Abitur make no sign?" asked the other, with the same covert mockery in his tone.

"There were shrieks heard in the mountain more than once before dawn," answered Sarchedon; "but they seemed too shrill and faint for the voice of man or demon. Some of the queen's women, who went up with her, affirmed they were cries of lamentation from those daughters of earth scorched in the olden time by the embraces of the stars, wailing that they could not die till they had touched their spirit-lovers once again. And the queen inclined to think so too."

"But you—what did you think?" inquired the Egyptian, not repressing a smile.

"I was of the guard," replied the Assyrian simply; "and I thought with the Great King that the women in the mountain were fairer and fresher than in the plain; also that our spearmen were ever somewhat hasty and eager with those who would be wooed, before they were won. But we marched down again to Nineveh at sunrise, and for my part, I saw no more of Abitur than I had seen of Baal."

The other pondered, as if he scarcely listened. Presently he looked up, and asked—

"This queen of yours—is she, then, so beautiful?"

It was a topic on which Sarchedon could be eloquent, even in a dungeon.

"Beautiful!" he repeated. "In Assyria all our women are beautiful; but by the side of the Great Queen the fairest of them show like pearls against a diamond. You have seen morning rising, serene and radiant out of the east—the brow of Semiramis is purer, calmer, fresher than the dawn. When she turns her eyes on you, it is like the golden lustre of noonday; and her smile is brighter and more glorious than sunset in the desert—sweeter, softer, lovelier than the evening breeze amongst the palms. To look on her face unveiled is to be the Great Queen's slave for evermore."

"You have looked on it more than once it seems, and to some purpose," was the answer.

"I have seen her in silk and steel," replied Sarchedon, "robe and diadem, helmet and war-harness. Deck her how you will, she rivals Ashtaroth, Queen of Heaven, herself. There is not her equal on earth. 'Tis thought, indeed, that she is more than mortal, and will never taste of death."

"Like Pharaoh," said the other, laughing outright. "Nevertheless, if she have many guards stout and devoted as yourself, there can be small risk for that fair body of hers from outward foe. Yet I have heard she mounts a war-

chariot and bends a bow with the bravest warriors in your host."

"I was in Bactria," answered Sarchedon, "when the Great Queen surprised ten thousand spearmen of the enemy with the royal guard alone, and a handful of horsemen she had begged of Ninus to bring in corn from the plains the night before. She drove her war-chariot through the thickest of the press, ere we could close in on it, and when we came up with her, she had but one arrow left in the quiver, while around her lay a circle of slain. Her cheek seemed a little flushed, but the smile was on her lip, and her eyes shone softer, lovelier, kinder than ever. The Great King swore that of all the captains in his host, she was the wariest and boldest, but he forbade her sternly such ventures of battle for the future. 'How shall I tarry, when my lord is in front?' was her answer, gentle and low as I am speaking to you now. He would have taken her in his arms then and there, before the assembled host. Perhaps he did; but she had scarcely spoken, when the trumpets rang out an alarm that the Bactrians were upon us, and I was down with an arrow through my ribs, almost ere you could have bent a bow. But for Sargon, the royal shield-bearer, who dragged me from under a broken chariot and a dead horse, I had never lifted spear again. The next time I saw the queen she was riding single-handed against a lion, that had slain two of her dogs, and put her people to flight."

"Single-handed!" exclaimed the Egyptian, "and against a lion! But you made in to help without delay?"

"You know not our laws of the land of Shinar," replied Sarchedon. "He who draws bow at the royal quarry loses his right hand; he who takes a prey before the prince forfeits his life. I had been safer lying naked under the beast's very jaws than riding in unbidden between the lion and the Great Queen. Yet would I have ventured too, for the sake of her matchless face, but that while I stood watching, she brought her horse within a spear length of the mighty brute, and drove an arrow right through his heart from shoulder to shoulder. I turned rein then; for I knew Semiramis would like well to stand alone over the dead carcass, and jeer at her attendants as they came up."

"Brave, wise, politic," observed the Egyptian, "and yet, no doubt, a very woman to the core. What think you now? Would she rule prudently over the land of Shinar, if the Great King were gathered to his fathers amongst the stars?"

"No woman may reign over the sons of Ashur," was the

answer. "We only owe allegiance to a king. It is our privilege and our law."

"But hath she no favourites, this bold and beautiful archer?" pursued the other, turning his lamp so as to mark every line and shade of the prisoner's countenance. "None that share her sports and influence her counsels? The Great King waxes old; does the queen look kindly on none of all the fair and noble warriors about the palace or in the host?"

Not a quiver of his eyelid would have escaped the Egyptian's notice, but Sarchedon's brow was open and unconcerned, as his tone was loyal, while he replied—

"I am a prisoner, alone here in a dungeon; you are—what are you? A priest, an enchanter, a magician, backed, for all I can tell, by a company of Pharaoh's archers and a host of spirits from the Southern mountains. But were you and I standing two naked men in the market-place, that question had been answered with a buffet; were we in harness on the plain, it were well worth push of spear and clash of steel."

The Egyptian laughed once more—heartily this time, and without disguise.

"I am your friend," said he, "and you will not believe it. A powerful friend, too, as I have shown you, and one who, while able to crush you as a man crushes a locust beneath his hand, would yet lend you all the resources of his art for your solace here and your deliverance from captivity hereafter."

"You cannot set me free!" exclaimed Sarchedon, a delightful hope breaking in to cheer him like the dawn of day.

"I can foretell the future," answered the magician, "clearly, certainly, as you can relate the past. Behold this lamp: see, I darken it to a faint pale gleam. Look on it, and tell me what it shows."

In vain Sarchedon strained his eyes.

"A line of waving gold within the crystal," said he; "no more."

"Such is the blindness of him whose sight has not been sharpened by learning," replied the magician. "You are as the rower labouring at the oar, who can but see the ripple he leaves behind, and the banks on the river-side that he has passed. I am the steersman who scans the coming rapids, the rocks in mid-stream, the calm and comely reach of smooth water that sleeps beyond. I look into the crystal, and I behold a youth stretching his arms in freedom, rubbing, with unfettered hands, his eyes dazzled by the light of day. I

follow him into the presence of Pharaoh. I behold him on the king's right hand, clad in a dress of honour, drinking costly wine of the south from a cup of gold. He mounts a goodly steed, he talks joyfully with one of dress and bearing like his own, a troop of the sons of Ashur close round him, he rides away into the desert, and I see him no more. That youth bears a strange resemblance to him who stands before me now, with clasped hands and wondering eyes, a captive in the strongest dungeon ever built at the command of Pharaoh by a nation of slaves."

Sarchedon again prostrated himself at his visitor's feet.

"If you tell me true," he exclaimed, "I am the faithful servant of my lord for evermore."

"You will remember me when you are in Babylon," returned the other. "You will recall the wisdom and power of the Egyptians. You will tell your countrymen the wonders that I, the least and lowest amongst their wise and great, have shown you without an effort, and you will not forget that I have been your friend, even in your extreme need. Farewell! He who sent me summons me back to his presence, and we shall not meet again!"

Even while he spoke, a thick cloud of aromatic vapour filled the dungeon as before; when it cleared away the visitor was gone, and Sarchedon, looking blankly about him, began to think he had been the sport of his own fancy, beguiled by the illusions of a dream.

CHAPTER XXVI

DELIVERANCE

HAD his bodily powers been weakened by starvation, his mind, enfeebled in proportion, might, he thought, have played him false. But no; food and wine had been supplied with constant regularity; and testing his faculties in every way he could think of, he found them equal to any effort of observation or reflection he desired to make. Once more he tried the walls of his dungeon, and failed to discover the slightest symptoms of an opening through which the visitor could have passed. This seemed less surprising, as the blossoming of the ebony rod and sudden growth of the lotus in flower denoted supernatural powers, which might well penetrate a cubit of brickwork and a fathom or two of solid earth. These wonders he accepted without question as worked by the spells of that magic lore which could compel the gods themselves to do its bidding; nor did he see reason to doubt, in his simple credulity, those glimpses of the future which, though sealed to his own eyes, seemed clear as day to his companion.

And that companion—who and what could he be? Sarchedon, whose ideas of a magician were of the vaguest, had yet some indistinct persuasion that such a professor must be old and stately, with long grey beard and thoughtful wrinkled brow. His late visitor, however, could scarcely yet have reached middle life, and on his countenance, so far as he had observed it, was stamped the wary vigilance, the keen foresight, of the man of action, rather than the serene and saddened wisdom that denotes the man of thought. Those eyes, too, haunted him strangely. Where had he seen the piercing gaze, half pitiful, half mocking, that seemed to master a man's inmost feelings, and scorn them while it read? He grew very restless and uneasy now. He paced to and fro in his dungeon, clenching his hands, grinding his teeth, longing with wild feverish desire to breathe the desert air, and strike a blow for liberty in the light of day once more. He had

been calm, quiet, almost resigned when captivity seemed inevitable, and death near at hand.

The time dragged on so, that again he slept, despairing, exhausted, heart-sick with hope deferred. As usual in calamity, the darkest hour was that which brought the dawn. He was woke by the measured tramp of marching men. The door of his cell opened, and a strong light streamed in, showing the passage outside filled with archers. He drew himself together, like a wolf amongst the hounds, resolved on fighting to the death; but the captain had fallen at his feet, and was pressing the hem of Sarchedon's garment to his lips.

"Let my lord look favourably on his servant," said the archer, "whose happy lot it is to conduct him into the presence of Pharaoh, there to be clothed in a dress of honour, and to stand at the right hand of my lord the king."

Confused, bewildered, all the more that he recalled the magician's words, Sarchedon followed his conductor from the dungeon, gazing about him amongst the guard like a man in a dream. Passing down their ranks, he recognised him who had bestowed on the prisoner his own scanty meal at the cell-door. The Assyrian wrenched from his tunic a golden clasp in the form of a serpent—the only ornament save his mysterious amulet left on his person—and thrust it in the bowman's hand as he went by. The latter kissed it reverently, while he whispered in the next man's ear.

"A good deed is like a handful of millet cast into the Nile. After many days, lo, the river goes back to its bed, and leaves you a harvest!"

"True enough," replied his comrade. "As our proverb runs—'When the waters wane, then sprouts the grain.' But the harvest of thy good deeds, my friend, would be reaped but once in seven years at best."

"Silence!" interrupted his captain; and the archers closing in the rear, escorted Sarchedon ceremoniously to the palace.

Here he was received by sundry officials gorgeously attired, and obviously belonging to the royal household, who vied with each other in rendering him every service that could be offered by inferiors to their lord. They ushered him into a cool and spacious chamber, rich in fantastic decorations, and ornamented with coloured figures of beast, bird, and reptile. Here they stripped and rubbed him with fragrant ointments; conducting him thence to the bath, from which two active Ethiopians extricated him, grinning from ear to ear as they dried his stalwart frame with the finest cloths, kneading and chafing limbs and joints till his whole person glowed and tingled from

the friction. Then they brought him such a dress of honour as might become the favourite of a king; and placing before him roast kid, parched locusts, milk, spices, honey, wine, and fruit from Pharaoh's own table, left him to be served by half a score of such Egyptian officials as waited on the king himself.

Presently the same captain of archers who had brought him from the dungeon appeared at the door of his chamber, prostrating himself with extreme humility ere he ventured to advance.

"When my lord has eaten and drank," said he, "and comforted his heart, I am sent to conduct him into the presence of Pharaoh. Thy servant is the bearer of good tidings. Let him find favour in the sight of my lord."

"There needs not so much ceremony," answered Sarchedon. "Are we not warriors both?—enemies yesterday, perhaps enemies to-morrow, in the meantime friends and comrades to-day?"

"My lord speaks good words to the lowest of his servants, out of the fulness of his own heart. How shall I answer him whom the king delighteth to honour according to his greatness? What am I but dust beneath the feet of my lord?"

While he spoke thus humbly, it was evident to the Assyrian that his conductor did but veil under this affectation of extreme deference a strong professional jealousy and an intense hatred of race. He recognised in the Egyptian warrior's dress and harness the distinctive marks of a certain company, celebrated in Pharaoh's armies for their warlike prowess—a company that the Great King, with a handful of his bodyguard, had driven to the very gates of Memphis, during his last campaign. Its captain would fain have been bending a bow to-day against the Assyrian's breast, rather than thus humbling himself at every step before a national enemy; but his first duty was to Pharaoh, and Pharaoh had commanded that the prisoner should be brought to him with all the honours of a prince.

They proceeded in silence through the lofty halls and corridors of the palace, traversing that well-remembered court, in which stood the royal judgment-seat—silent and deserted now but for several cats, arching their backs and rubbing their sides against the pedestal of their own especial deity, and a pair of storks, each standing on one slender leg, with head tucked back and wary eye, in the places of accuser and accused, at the steps of Pharaoh's throne.

"I little thought to have come here again," said the light-hearted Assyrian, "save as a doomed man passing naked to the stake; and, behold, I march by in a dress of honour at the head of a hundred archers. Who shall say what a day may bring forth?"

The well-drilled features of the Egyptian forced themselves to smile.

"Man is but a vain thing," he answered sententiously—"a strained shaft, a riven harness, a broken bow! But the king's hand stretches far and wide. He giveth or taketh away, setteth up or casteth down, and Pharaoh lives for ever!"

The last four words he spoke in a loud voice, falling immediately on his face; for they were entering the royal banquet-hall, at the extremity of which the king sat in person, under a canopy of state, attended only by his cup-bearer and the official who carried his fan.

A venerable man, whom Sarchedon recognised as having stood at his right hand while the king administered judgment, now stepped forward, and conducted the guest to a place of honour provided for him, apart from the great lords and captains, who were ranged all down the hall. Passing before the royal table with a low obeisance, the Assyrian could not but be gratified by the reception accorded him: Pharaoh even raised the wine to his lips in acknowledgment of his guest's salute, while in the dark eyes that gleamed over his cup, Sarchedon thought he recognised something of that mocking mirth which had so disturbed him in the magician's gaze, who foretold the term of his captivity. But he was destined to higher honours yet; for no sooner had he taken his seat than a portion of meat and a cup of wine were served him from the king's own table, by no less a person than the old man who had conducted him thither—Phrenes, governor of Egypt, second only in rank and authority to Pharaoh himself.

Adopting a tone of confidential intercourse, as with an equal, this magnate now bade Sarchedon look round amongst these lords and captains for the familiar face of a countryman. Had he not been so accustomed to wonders of late, he could scarcely have believed his eyes when he observed Sethos, gorgeously attired in the Assyrian fashion, seated like himself in a place of honour, and pouring out a drink-offering to the gods of his own land, ere he quenched his thirst with the choicest wine of Egypt from a cup of gold.

"He will scarce recognise you in that dress," said Phrenes;

"but it was the command of Pharaoh to make amends for the mishap of your ill-usage and imprisonment, by such honours as are paid to the prince who is next the throne. He must needs be a man of mark at home for whose sake an Assyrian king sends his own cup-bearer with an embassy to Pharaoh."

"An embassy to Pharaoh!" In the last stage of astonishment, Sarchedon could only repeat the other's words.

"No less," assented Phrenes. "And you must not take offence if I tell you it arrived here not a day too soon. Your accusation was a heavy one, and the penalty of your crime was death. These sons of shepherds begin to overrun the land. Some of our wisest counsellors would rejoice to be rid of them once for all; but Pharaoh loves well to see great buildings growing to the skies, cubit by cubit, and day by day. He would not willingly let this people go. Meanwhile they increase and multiply till it seems that ere long they will outnumber their lords. If they had arms, or could use them, it might come to a bad ending. We keep them down with labour, and tame them with blows; nevertheless, if a leader should rise up amongst them, they have it in their power to vex us sore. You had not crossed into the dominions of Pharaoh a day ere your person and character were as well known to us as they are now. When it came out that yours was the daring hand which smote the Egyptian, we did you the justice to believe you were a dangerous offender, and condemned you accordingly, even before you were accused."

"Your opinion of me far exceeded my merits," answered Sarchedon, who did not fail to perceive he had run a very narrow risk. "To which of the gods, then, did I owe my unexpected deliverance?"

"Neither to Thmei nor Thoth," replied Phrenes. "Justice and policy alike counselled a short examination and a speedy sentence; but Pharaoh"—here he dropped his voice with an affectation of extreme caution—"Pharaoh, whose wisdom is infallible, determined that you should be kept in safe ward until he had caused you to disclose the inmost secrets of this captive people with whom you had cast in your lot."

"I could have told him nothing!" exclaimed Sarchedon; "nor would I have turned traitor to the hand that succoured me for the half of his kingdom."

"It is well, then," answered the other calmly, "that the question was never asked. It must be a loud shriek to reach upper earth from those dungeons of ours; and in my opinion,

though Pharaoh thinks otherwise, knowledge is bought too dear even from a criminal at the price of torture."

Sarchedon shuddered. Glancing across the hall at the king's calm cruel face, he could not help thinking how fruitless would have been an appeal for mercy, how hopeless an attempt at escape.

"Had you tortured me to death," said he, "you would have gained nothing for yourselves but shame!"

"There was fortunately no need," replied the other with exceeding courtesy. "Ere Pharaoh had leisure to attend to your affairs in person, lo, there comes a cloud of horsemen out of Assyria, bearing rich presents, speaking honeyed words, yet demanding plainly enough that you should be delivered to them unhurt; threatening vengeance if a single hair of your head had fallen while in our charge. And Ninyas, it seems, is no more to be trifled with than his father."

"Ninyas!" repeated Sarchedon. "Doth the Great King then rule no longer in Babylon?"

"Have you not heard?" replied the other. "Ninus has gone to his gods, wherever they may be, and Ninyas his son reigns in his stead. If the new king's counsellors be like that gaudy youth who hath ridden here on behalf of his lord, sound wisdom must be less sought after than shining raiment about his throne."

He signed with something of contempt towards Sethos, who had now caught sight of his countryman, and, being well warmed with wine, was showing as much satisfaction as seemed compatible with the dignified presence in which he found himself. The banquet, according to the custom of the Egyptians, was prolonged to a late hour. When the guests could eat and drink no more, singing-women entered the hall, bearing fruit and flowers and golden measures of the rarest wines. These were succeeded by dancers conspicuous for their beauty, and much appreciated by Sethos, who could not refrain from audible comments on their charms. Wrestlers also, and tumblers of the other sex, relieved them at intervals; and if Sarchedon in his heart more admired the upright forms and noble proportions of his countrymen, he could not but admit that the pliancy of limb and supple dexterity of those Egyptians were beyond praise.

The sun had long set, and scores of lamps were flashing their radiance over the revellers, ere a slow sad dirge swelled through the palace, while an image of Osiris, swathed in mummy-clothes, and stretched corpse-like on a bier, was borne to the feet of Pharaoh himself. Then Phrenes, who, to

his weightier avocations, added that of Master of the Feast, raised his hands aloft for silence, and in the hush of voices spoke that solemn warning with which it was the custom of Egypt to close its richest entertainments—

"What is man? Nothing. What is life? Nothing. What is death? Nothing. For we are born at an adventure; and when we go hence, it will be as though we had never seen the day. Life, though short, is weary; death, though unwelcome, is not to be escaped. Let us, then, enjoy the good things that are present; let us comfort our hearts with wine, and gladden our faces with oil, and crown our locks with flowers; for wine hath lees and oil hath dregs, and ere set of sun the lotus herself shall have faded and passed away. Let none go fasting to his bed, nor joyless to his grave, because in sleep there is neither mirth nor mourning; there is neither good nor evil in the tomb. What is man, then? Nothing. But Pharaoh lives for ever!"

Then the strangers passed once more before the king, Sethos and Sarchedon receiving each a costly present, the other Assyrians being also gladdened with gifts according to their rank. It would have seemed beneath the dignity of Pharaoh to hold converse with strangers in person; but Phrenes, when he bade them farewell, took occasion to enlarge on the power and riches of his own country, reminding the visitors of its arts, its fertility, its resources in peace and war. Lastly, retaining him for a moment behind his companions, he whispered in Sarchedon's ear—

"Forget not how the captive in his dungeon found favour in the sight of my lord the king. He bids you think of Pharaoh when you are exalted in your own country, and above all, he warns you, despise not the wisdom of the Egyptians."

CHAPTER XXVII

IN THE DESERT

ONCE more in the saddle, once more in the light of day, once more in the boundless desert, free as the wild ass devouring the plain, the long-winged hawk darting across the sun. Sarchedon set his horse to its speed, and circled round the troop of warriors who accompanied him, in sheer ecstasy of liberty and motion. How could he refrain? Was it not life itself to feel beneath his limbs the old familiar swerve, and swing, and long elastic bound? fingering with light and skilful touch the quivering rein, to which every motion answered, like the chord of an instrument responsive to the practised hand of a musician? to borrow from the animal under him, till each quality seemed his own, the speed of a wild deer, the strength of a mountain bull, and the gentle generous courage peculiar to a good horse alone? Yes, it was worth long days and nights of captivity, of restless slumber and weary waking, of listless apathy and dull sickening despair, to back a steed, wear sword on thigh, and shake a javelin in the pure still air of the wilderness once again. He said as much to Sethos, while they turned in the saddle to look their last on the great pyramids of Egypt, sinking into the plain behind them. The cup-bearer, moderating his companion's pace, like his own, to the springing walk of their pure-bred steeds, expressed, as usual, his earnest desire to behold the walls, pinnacles, and brazen gates of great Babylon, with her pleasures and her repose.

"A place, my friend," said Sethos, "that I was sore afraid you would never see again. A fallen man in the desert is more commonly picked up by jackals than Israelites; and it is not every horse that would take another rider back, as did Merodach, to the very spot where he laid his master on the sand. By the belt of Nimrod, I always said, for camp or march, charge or chase, I have not found such a steed in the Great King's host as the white horse with the wild eye."

"Brave Merodach!" answered Sarchedon; "I would I were across him now. Bold, gentle, and true, I never saw him frightened, and I never felt him tired."

"He was scared that night, nevertheless," said Sethos. "He came by me like a stone out of a sling, even as I reached the middle gate in the southern wall; but the archers on watch turned him back, and when I caught his bridle, he let me lead him through the crowded streets like a dog. By the brows of Ashtaroth, it was a night not to be forgotten in Babylon, while the great tower of Belus has one brick standing on another."

"Was there a tumult, then?" asked Sarchedon. "Our countrymen need but little to stir them into action at a festival."

"Not so much a tumult," answered the cup-bearer, "as a great awe and horror over all. The streets were thick with people; but men looked in each other's faces, and scarce dared ask what might come next. Some told me that the skies were raining fire and brimstone on the temple of Baal, and that ere dawn of morning the whole city was to be consumed; some that the Bactrians had vanquished our Great King's host, all scattered about in the plain; that their elephants could be seen from the walls, and that even now the fiercest of their mountaineers were advancing to the assault."

Sarchedon laughed.

"Such tidings should have vexed you but little," said he. "Did you not remember how we put them to flight by the Red Lake, from which our warriors drank so freely, believing it was wine? I slew three of their slingers at its very brim with my own hand."

"I remembered nothing," answered Sethos, "but that when they drew the sword they smote and spared not, old men and maidens, mothers and children, the warrior in harness, and the wounded at their feet. If the Bactrians were in truth over the wall, I bethought me whether it were not best to leap on Merodach, and gallop back into the desert from whence I came."

"It was a stout-hearted resolution," laughed Sarchedon, who knew the cup-bearer's courage to be beyond suspicion, but had not forgotten the disinclination to hard work, hard fare, and hard blows his friend was never ashamed of owning. "And what prevented this dignified retreat of the Great King's chief officer before an old woman's fable of an impossible attack?"

"Speak not lightly of women, old or young," returned Sethos. "If these make love, those make pottage; and thus two of man's chief needs are satisfied. I repeat, I had begun to think gravely of flight, when I met one in the crowd who was neither man nor woman precisely, but a priest of Baal. He told me that his god descended at nightfall in a chariot of fire, and had carried the Great King back with him to the stars. This was the light I saw flaring in the sky over the city, while I approached the gate."

"I saw it too," observed Sarchedon. "When I fell heavily to the ground, there passed before my eyes, as it were, a sheet of flame, and then I remember nothing more, till I found myself on an ass's back, faint and weak, swaying from side to side, but supported by that good old man who picked me off the sand."

"It was true enough," continued Sethos, "though told by a priest. While I was riding about on a fool's errand, uncertain where to turn my bridle, and you were galloping to and fro, with divers wild purposes I do not yet clearly understand, but which seem to have cost you somewhat dear, our Great King went up into his Talar to pour out a drink-offering to Baal. The god must have been thirsty, since he came down to wet his beard with wine in person, and Ninus must have been in milder mood than usual to mount the flaming chariot at his desire. Well, the Thirteen have gained a stern comrade, and the land of Shinar has lost the stoutest warrior that ever crossed a steed."

"We shall see his like no more," answered the other. "He was the last of those mighty men begotten by Nimrod to rule over the sons of Ashur with sword and spear. But it is written in the stars that the Great King lives for ever; and though Ninus be gone, doth not Ninyas his son reign in his stead?"

"Doubtless," was the reply. "So soon as the father set foot in his flaming chariot, the diadem of Ashur blazed on the son's bright comely brow. By the glory of Shamash, he shone beautiful as morning when he showed himself to the people with the royal circle over his head, the royal sceptre in his hand. There was a something changed in him too; I know not what—a dignity of bearing, a smoothness of gesture, a quiet courtesy to all—and he looked in his dazzling raiment more like a god than a king."

"Was there, then, no outbreak?" asked Sarchedon. "Unlike old Nineveh, the people of Babylon must be reined with the strong hand, in great and sudden changes such as these."

"With the strong hand!" exclaimed Sethos. "Why, the spearmen of the queen's host were drawn up in battle array by hundreds at the corner of every street, while bowmen clustered on wall and tower like locusts about a fig-tree. No man dared murmur if he would; and I think none who looked in his fair face could have desired a nobler king than Ninyas."

"And the queen?" said Sarchedon. "How fares it with Semiramis in her woe?"

"The queen remains hidden in her palace," replied his friend; "not to be seen of men while she makes her moan, rending her garments and scattering ashes on her head. Alas for the pride of her beauty, the pomp and power of her dominion! Surely her glory passed away with the smoke of the great sacrifice. Ninus ruled half the earth with his frown, and she ruled Ninus with her smile. But all is changed now."

"Has she, then, so little influence over her son?" asked Sarchedon, reining his horse to a halt in his preoccupation, while he pondered on his own future, and how it might be affected by these strange, unlooked-for events.

Ninyas, he had reason to believe, loved him but little; and the queen—he scarcely dared think of the terms on which he stood with the queen. In every direction his path seemed beset with difficulties. But for Ishtar, he could have been satisfied to remain in Egypt for ever, even in the dungeon—Ishtar, whom perhaps he was never to see again. He recalled the words of the magician; but their comfort was very vague and hollow, compared with the steadfast belief of Sadoc, whom no troubles seemed to perplex, no anticipations of evil to overcome. He almost envied the carelessness of his light-hearted comrade, who proceeded with his narrative as though it were but the detail of a lion-hunt or a festival.

"Ninyas seems resolved to reign in person—a great king, not only in name, but in authority, who bears sword as well as sceptre, and tarries longer in the seat of judgment than at the banquet of wine. I could not have believed a man's nature might be thus changed in the putting on of a tiara. When I prostrated myself in his presence, it seemed as though years had passed since he dismissed me in the desert, and rode back unattended into Babylon. Yet the interval was less than a day. And Merodach: he sent for the good horse to his royal stables, and caressed him fondly with his own hand."

"Merodach loves not strangers," replied Sarchedon. "But if Ninyas desires him, how shall his servant say him nay? Is not my life in the hands of the Great King? Something warns me, nevertheless, that the horse finds more favour in his sight than the rider."

"You speak thus in your ignorance," said Sethos. "Had he lost the great ruby from the handle of his sword, he could scarce have looked more anxious, more concerned. If you find not that you are first in favour when we return, never believe a king's cup-bearer again. Is it not for this I ride at your right hand so humble even now? Think of us when you come to high honour; but do not forget you owe more to your horse than your friend."

"I can well believe it," returned the other, smiling. "I have always trusted less in the man than the beast. Nevertheless, I am loath to be ungrateful, and will take care to remember both."

"Had I not been leading Merodach through the streets," continued Sethos, "I should not have been seen of Assarac; but the priest, knowing the white horse afar off, bade some archers clear a passage, and beckoned me to his presence. When he learned all I had to tell, how I had left you but a short space before the horse came flying by me riderless through the desert, he seemed unusually thoughtful and concerned: you know how rarely his face betrays his thoughts, how good or evil seems powerless to affect him, and yet there came a frown on his brow, a wicked fire in his eyes, while he listened to my tale. I could hardly learn whether he was pleased or angered, anxious for your safety or eager to know your fate. He tarried but an instant. Leaders and warriors were thronging round him for orders, and you would have thought him captain of a host setting the battle in array, rather than priest and eunuch preparing a sacrifice for his gods. He seemed calm enough while he gave his directions; but the same evil look gleamed in his eyes again when he bade me yield up Merodach in charge to his attendants, and return at daybreak to the palace. What more was done in Babylon that night must be related by others; for I was wearied sore, and when I lay down, without so much as taking off my harness, I slept as sound as all the Pharaohs—who live for ever—in their tombs."

"And with daybreak you learned what had befallen Ninus?" asked Sarchedon. "Of a truth, my friend, you must have felt that you woke to a new world."

"Not so," replied the other. "In the city, save that the

guards had been doubled, all was orderly and unchanged. The prophets of the grove had discontinued their leapings and howlings and brandishing of knives. The priests of Baal were busy cleaning gore and garbage from their temple. In the royal palace I found the old servants of Ninus, with the queen's archers, as usual, keeping their listless watch. When I prostrated myself at the threshold, it seemed as though I must needs fill the king's cup, and give him to drink with the first rays of the morning sun."

"A good old practice," observed Sarchedon, "and, if I know him, not to be discontinued by Ninyas during his reign."

"You do *not* know him, it seems," replied the other; "for I came no nearer his presence than the golden-winged bull in the middle of the Great Court. Here I was stopped by Assarac, who bade me attend the king armed and mounted within an hour at the southern wall. When I tendered the wine-cup, he laughed, and said these old-world practices were to be discontinued for the future; but I have no fear I shall lose my office, nevertheless."

"You are little given to despair," said his friend; "I know that of old."

"As chance would have it," resumed Sethos, in perfect good faith, "I fell in with Kalmim, wearing her garment rent and her hair about her face, but otherwise little vexed with woe; and she found time to bid me keep heart, for that none of my honours, said she, would be taken away, but rather new rewards added thereto; and in this she spoke truth, though I scarce believed her at the time, for I thought Ninyas would have done well to place me on his right hand in sight of all the people. So I got to saddle with a heavy heart, and hastened me to the southern wall, where I found the king and but two attendants — mountain-men, well skilled to take a prey. Ninyas rode to and fro amongst the vineyards on Merodach, turning the beast to his hand as though it had borne him ever since it wore a bridle."

Sarchedon's face fell.

"I shall never ride him again," said he. "When a man has once backed a horse like Merodach, he would take him by force from his own brother."

"Ninyas seemed to love him well," replied Sethos, "for his palm was never off neck or shoulder, and I swear by Ashur I saw him once press his lips against the horse's crest. But he seemed strangely hurried and restless, holding little discourse with me, but consulting eagerly the mountain-men

who accompanied us. One of these bade me point out the exact spot at which Merodach passed me in his flight, and of this I could make sure because I remembered how a single palm was growing there by a spring. When we reached it, Ninyas laid the rein on Merodach's neck, and, lo, the horse broke eagerly into a gallop, stretching away over the desert at speed, so that it cost us some trouble to keep him in sight. The king never touched his bridle, but let the beast bear him how and where it would. My horse was already failing under me, when they halted at a spot where lay a splintered arrow and a few large bones picked white and bare. Merodach stood still, snorting and trembling, while the tears fell from the king's eyes. Then the mountain-men alighted, and showed how a human body had lain here the night before, and how it had been lifted carefully by one whose footmarks were to be traced, deep and wide, under his burden. Also, how others had gathered round, leading their asses; and even boasted they could distinguish the prints of that on which the fallen man had been disposed. 'Can you track them?' asked the king in a hoarse whisper; and he promised a reward of camels and oxen, costly raiment, and a talent of gold each, if they could follow up the chase successfully, and return with good tidings of its result. The mountain-men earned their wages fairly. It was not long ere they brought back to Babylon such intelligence as seemed to cause the king no little concern and anxiety. But that his royal word was passed, I think Ninyas would have impaled them both, having no better news to tell. They had traced you into Egypt, they said, and had left you lying in prison by the decree of Pharaoh, under sentence of death. I would have given you up, my friend, then; but our young king, it seems, abandons not his servants at their greatest need. He sent for me to the royal palace, and though I entered not his presence, I was received in the outer chamber by Assarac, who clad me in a dress of honour, and threw a chain of gold about my neck. You never saw such workmanship! Had the links been but of bronze, they were so wrought as to be worth a score of camels each. They prate of their gold and silver down yonder," added Sethos, with a backward nod, "but I would defy the whole of Egypt, with all her furnaces, to produce such a chain as that!"

"You were wise not to bring it with you," observed Sarchedon. "They are skilful thieves, and would have stolen it from round your very throat while you slept."

The cup-bearer's swarthy cheek reddened.

"I gave it away," said he, "for all my haste, ere I laid hand on bridle to ride southward. I know not if 'tis so with you, Sarchedon, but I can keep nothing from a woman that she desires of me—not even the secret of my dearest friend. They seem to have some strange power over our wills, like that by which I turn this good horse under me with the rein."

Sarchedon thought of Ishtar, and held his peace.

"The eunuch's directions," continued Sethos, "were brief enough. He wastes few words, you know, when there is need of action. 'You will mount at noon,' said he, 'and ride without delay to the steps of Pharaoh's throne, wherever he may be. You will take valuable presents. Such a troop will accompany you as can protect you from violence or insult. To Pharaoh's own face you will deliver the words of the Great King, bidding him the salutation of brotherhood and peace, but demanding the body of his Assyrian prisoner alive and unhurt. If he refuse, or if a hair of Sarchedon's head have fallen, you will break your bow asunder, and cast the fragments at his feet, telling him you will return to claim them with an army of the sons of Ashur, to which the last that entered Egypt was but as the lizard in the garden to the mighty monster of the Nile. Be lavish, peremptory, and bold. The king hath spoken.' You may believe, my friend, that I turned my head more than once, thinking I might be taking my last look of beautiful Babylon. To beard Pharaoh on his throne with a handful even of the bravest horsemen in Assyria seemed an action savouring little of wisdom or common prudence; but, as the old king used to swear, Nisroch strikes with him who trusts his own right hand. So, when I did find myself in Pharaoh's presence, I spoke out as if the hosts of Assyria stood in array a bow-shot from my back. Small reason had I to complain of my reception. A king in person could not have been greeted with a nobler welcome. What riches! what luxury! what splendour! I would we had taken their whole country when we fought so hard to cross their river under the old king's leadership. Pharaoh must have been weakened to some purpose, or he had scarce listened patiently to a demand which seemed well-nigh a defiance. There was delay, indeed, ere they produced you, and I feared for a time you had been slain in one of their secret dungeons; but I took my bow from my back in presence of Phrenes, and made as though I would break it across my knee. The old man turned white with fear, and that very day I beheld you at the banquet of wine, seated

in a place of honour and apparelled like a king's son. Then my heart leaped within me; for I knew that we were both safe, and might hope to drink the wine of Damascus within the walls of Babylon once more. I would we had a cup of it now!"

Sarchedon was silent. His friend's account of the means by which an imprisonment that seemed so hopeless had been cancelled, a decree of Pharaoh reversed, perplexed him more and more. That he should have attained thus suddenly to the favour of Ninyas, on accession of the latter to his father's throne, was perhaps to be accounted for by one of those caprices to which he had already seen men owe great honours and promotion under the authority of a despot; but that the king should have ridden in person to discover his track, should have actually shed tears of pity for his supposed fate, was so strange, that he left to future events the solution of such a riddle, resolving for the present to content himself with the improvement in his prospects, and the hope that, when free and amongst his own countrymen, he might succeed in obtaining some traces of the fate of Ishtar, some clue to the perpetrators of that outrage by which Arbaces lost his life. Deep in his own heart he swore never to rest until he had recovered his lost love and avenged the slaughter of her father—blood for blood.

Thus journeying northward through the plain, at a rate which promised ere many more furlongs were passed to bring them across the confines of Egypt into their own land of Shinar, they observed a cloud of dust rising on the sky-line behind them, and extending so far along the horizon that it threatened to encompass their little troop in its embrace. Swiftly as they travelled, it seemed to advance more swiftly still. The Assyrian horsemen looked in each other's faces with blank dismay, but none liked to be the first in expressing a hideous apprehension that curdled at each man's heart. Nevertheless, reins were instinctively tightened and horses pressed to increased speed. Presently Sethos laid his hand on his companion's bridle-arm, and pointed ominously to the rear.

"Behold the red simoom!" he whispered. "The demon of the desert has spread his wings from side to side, and there is no escape. It is the will of Nisroch. When he breathes in our faces, we must die!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

A RIDE FOR LIFE

THE little troop had been picked from the boldest horsemen of Assyria. Not a man but would have spent life freely under the banner of Ashur, and charged home into the host of an enemy, though outnumbered ten to one. Their warlike traditions, their national character, their pride and self-respect, had taught them to shrink from no professional danger, to yield before no living foe; but the bold faces were pale now, and the proud eyes haggard. They rode in wild disorder, as though flying before the shadow of death; while the pure-bred steeds that bore them snorted, and shook their bridles gaily, exulting in the glory of their strength, the easy freedom of their speed.

The simoom, even in its natural terrors, might well be an object of dread to man and beast. No fate seems much more horrible than to be overwhelmed and drowned in a storm of sand. But the Assyrian had been also taught to regard this danger as a supernatural foe, a gigantic demon of the desert, hidden in lurid clouds, advancing swift, insatiable, portentous, swallowing furlongs at every stride, to seize and stifle him in an inevitable embrace. Even Sethos caught the infection, and pushed his horse to its speed with reckless energy, panic-stricken as the rest. Sarchedon could not forbear a laugh.

"Hold!" he exclaimed, while he shot with some difficulty to the front, raising his bow horizontally above his head to stop the undisciplined flight. "Hold, fools and faint of heart! Can you not turn for one look in your enemy's face, ere you scour away before him like a herd of frightened deer? Stop, I say; lest I drive an arrow through the foremost of ye, and leave him to be picked clean by the vultures ere the sun goes down!"

"The simoom!" gasped the leading horseman, pressing wildly onward without pause.

"The simoom!" repeated Sarchedon, seizing the other's

bridle, and thus bringing him to an involuntary halt. "Do you call yourself a son of Ashur, and not know better the arms and apparel of your enemy? Can you see the violet spot that marks the demon's eye, the purple hem that borders his garment, the golden spangles that glitter through his vail? For shame, man! And you, too, Sethos; I could not have believed you would turn and fly, with bow and spear in hand, from a bushel of dust flung up on the wayside!"

Thus arguing, storming, and gesticulating, he succeeded in pacifying the terror of his comrades, who consented to halt for a space and breathe their horses, while they scanned the appearance that had given rise to their alarm. The peril, when they examined it more coolly, was none the less threatening that its cause seemed in no way supernatural. The clouds of sand had indeed increased both in extent and volume; but through the folds of that dusky curtain gleamed here and there a sparkle of steel, while at its skirts an opaque winding line denoted to a warrior's eye the approach of a strong body of horse. The Assyrians became somewhat reassured, though Sethos and Sarchedon looked doubtfully from each other's faces to the advancing host. Already they could distinguish fluttering garments, uplifted spears, and the banners of Egypt waving over all.

"He has sent to fetch us back!" exclaimed the cup-bearer. "He has repented him of his counsel, and we have not done with Pharaoh yet!"

Sarchedon burst into a mocking laugh.

"Have they wings like the south wind," said he, "that they hope to overtake the horses of Assyria in the open desert with heads turned for home? If, as in good truth it seems, there be too many to fight, let us put on at speed, and the hosts of Pharaoh shall toil after us in vain."

They galloped on accordingly at a steady even pace, which, while it could be kept up for a considerable distance, gained surely though gradually on their pursuers. But the desert, flat, open, and boundless as the sea, has also its ports and havens, to which men put in for fresh water and repose, thus diverging from the straight line of their direct course. The Assyrians, therefore, now resuming the shortest way to their own land, found they had described an arc, of which, in order to overtake them, their pursuers needed only to speed along the chord. And thus it fell out that, nearing a range of rocks, one of the few landmarks in the wilderness, they came suddenly on an ambush of Egyptian horsemen, who had pushed forward to post themselves in that hiding-place.

The little troop now found an enemy in front and rear, the latter overwhelming in numbers, the former too strong for so scanty a force to break through. They halted, and took counsel, inclining to dash forward in a desperate charge, when an old man rode out from the ranks of their opponents, making signs of parley and peace. Even a bow-shot off they recognised Phrenes. Sarchedon and Sethos advanced therefore to meet him, bidding their comrades remain in the saddle with bows bent, watching every movement of the Egyptians. The old man broke his spear across, and cast it at their feet in token of amity.

"Your servant has ridden far and fast," said he, "to bid you return into Egypt, and look on the light of Pharaoh's countenance once more. Behold, my lords, these also are your servants, sent to bring you in honour to his palace beyond the Nile."

"We have taken our leave of my lord the king," returned Sethos courteously, but keeping his horse well in hand under him; "Pharaoh has given gifts to his servants, bidding them depart in peace. Why, then, should we return at an untoward season, to the incumbrance of my lord the king?"

Phrenes cast one glance back amongst his followers, a glance not unobserved by those he addressed, while he replied—

"What am I, that I should interpret between my lords and the king my master? I pray you, now, return with me of good-will. So shall you come to great honour, and sit on thrones in the land of Egypt."

While he spoke, he edged his horse gradually round, showing no slight skill in the art of managing it, so as to place himself between the Assyrians and their comrades.

"Not a bow-shot will I return," answered Sethos, "until I have fulfilled mine embassy, and sought in the land of Shinar a new command from the Great King."

The Egyptians, meanwhile, continued to move their horses imperceptibly nearer the two Assyrians, who were now separated from their companions. The cup-bearer, suspecting treachery, held his bow in readiness with an arrow fitted to the string, while his movements were exactly copied by the Assyrians, narrowly watching and mistrusting the parley. Sarchedon too grasped a broad-headed javelin, prepared to hurl it at a moment's notice into the ranks of the enemy.

"I bid you once more in peace," said Phrenes, holding

"At the same time Sarchedon's weapon transfixed the nearest Egyptian"

up his hand as it seemed for a signal to his followers. "If you think to resist the might of Egypt, your blood be on your own head! Pharaoh lives for"—

He never finished the sentence, with the conclusion of which it was doubtless intended that the two isolated horsemen should be surrounded and taken prisoners. The cup-bearer's bow-string rattled even while he spoke, and Phrenes fell heavily to the ground, with a shaft quivering in his heart. At the same moment Sarchedon's weapon transfixed the nearest Egyptian, and a storm of arrows from the Assyrians created no small confusion in the rest of the band. Horses reared, men lost their seats and weapons, shouting, storming, jostling each other, and looking in vain for someone to direct; while the Assyrians turned bridle without delay, to speed over the plain at a pace which put them many an arrow's flight from their enemies ere the latter had sufficiently recovered to form line and bend their bows.

It was a ride for life through the desert. The rest of Pharaoh's army had been advancing rapidly during the parley; their horses were fresher than those they pursued; and it would have been madness for the Assyrians to dream of resisting such a force, if it should succeed in overtaking them. Sarchedon seemed to see the well-remembered gloom of his Egyptian dungeon gathering round him once again. His horse, too, began to fail, labouring to keep up with its companions. Bitterly did he now regret the childish enthusiasm that had tempted him to waste its strength and mettle at the commencement of their journey.

"It is enough," said he. "My time is come. I will strive all that one man can to delay a host. Peradventure when they have slain or taken me, they will suffer you to escape unhurt."

"Not so," replied Sethos, looking anxiously over his shoulder. "They gain on us but little. Nay, take heart, my friend; we may baffle them yet. Surely we are in the land of Shinar now. And yonder, by the beard of Nimrod and the beauty of Ashtaroth! I see the City of Towers, and the Silver Lake glittering in the sun!"

"It is but the paradise of the desert," answered Sarchedon sadly. "I have ridden after it many a weary hour, but never reached it yet."

In spite of the enemy's rapid approach, Sethos reined in his horse, and shaded his brows with his hand, in sore misgiving that he was the dupe of that mirage which is so remarkable an effect of a level surface, a rarefied atmosphere,

and a dazzling sun. Then he observed with the utmost calmness—

"Lofty palms, and shining pinnacles, and golden waters, all these adorn the paradise of the desert; but who hath yet seen the banner of Ashur floating over its walls? If those be not the towers of Ascalon, may I never drink a cup of Damascus wine, nor drive an arrow through a false Egyptian heart again! We are safe, my friend. Look yonder at that glitter in the sky-line; it is the flash of sunlight on the western sea."

CHAPTER XXIX

THE CITY OF REFUGE

THE fugitives pressed on apace, Sarchedon's horse, though wavering and exhausted, vindicating nobly the purity of its lineage, a race of which none ever failed to answer the rider's hand and voice, ask what he would; but when they stopped, they fell stone dead. Nevertheless, the foremost Egyptians gained ground too surely, and ere the Assyrians came under the protection of a friendly city, the swiftest of their pursuers had already halted to bend their bows.

A volley of arrows whistled round Sarchedon's head, who arrived last within the welcome shelter of the walls, bristling with bowmen, prepared to defend it against a host. As the great gate closed behind him, he heard the war-cry of Ashur swelling to a shout of triumph; while the baffled Egyptians, making the circuit of the place at a gallop, wheeled round and withdrew into the desert, as though content to abandon their prey.

"I never wish to look on Pharaoh's face again," said Sethos, drawing a long breath of relief, while leaping nimbly to the ground, he loosened the girths of his panting steed. "I have fronted the Great King in his wrath, and it seemed like passing through a burning fiery furnace, that scorches the beard and blisters the skin; but under the cold eye of Pharaoh, I could feel the chill of death creeping into the marrow of my bones."

Sarchedon did not answer. His heart was beating fast, and all the blood in his body seemed surging to his brain; for amongst the spectators looking down from the housetops on the entrance of their countrymen, he had caught sight of a veiled figure, that had in it something of her air and

gestures who was never absent from his mind—the object of his search, the desire of his life, the woman he had loved and lost. It was but a momentary glimpse. The figure disappeared almost as soon as seen. Nevertheless, for Sarchedon there was henceforth but one aim, one interest, in the whole city of Ascalon.

His progress through the streets reminded Sethos, though on a less splendid scale, of the Great King's return after his successful Egyptian campaign, with its greetings, its enthusiasm, its shouts of welcome, and casting down of flowers on the warriors' heads, though the numbers were scanty, compared to the population of imperial Babylon, the height from which the garlands dropped but mean and humble, measured by the pinnacles and terraces that crowned the City of Palaces, throned on her mighty stream.

Long before it could arrive beneath her walls, the watchman at the gate of Ascalon had espied this scanty troop of his countrymen advancing through the desert, pursued by an enemy from that south on which it was his duty to keep a sleepless eye. Ere Sarchedon became satisfied that he was making for a tangible stronghold, and not an illusion of the sandy wilderness, the city had been alarmed, and its Assyrian garrison, tried warriors all, were at their posts. Scores of bowmen therefore lined the streets through which the little party passed. Many a broad hand tendered its grasp of welcome and good-fellowship to the comrade who had baffled yet one more danger, foiled the hated Egyptian with bow and spear yet once again. Agron, the captain of the gate, a young warrior in whose company Sethos had often emptied the wine-cup, spending days and nights of revelry amongst the material joys of his beloved Babylon, himself accompanied them to the stronghold of the city, now brightened by a certain appearance of luxurious indulgence, added to its usual aspect of defence and grim security.

"Here," said Agron, "you shall be brought into the royal presence, with the rising of to-morrow's sun. You shall be sped on your way to Babylon under such a guard as may laugh Pharaoh and all his chariots to scorn, if indeed they dare thus pursue their venture into the land of Shinar. Fear not, my friends; you shall ride out of Ascalon almost as swiftly as you rode in, and I wish it had been the will of Nisroch that I might be permitted to accompany you."

"Are you then so weary of the City of Towers?" asked Sethos, smiling gaily on a group of women who were pelting him with flowers from an upper storey. "It seems to me

that here, as elsewhere, Ashtaroth shines down in light through the eyes of these southern damsels, and that Agron may bask in her beams no less pleasantly than at home."

"Ashtaroth!" repeated the other scornfully, "and the City of Towers! Say rather Shamash and the City of Fire! Where shall you find a palm's-breadth of shade in the whole town at noon, or a green thing within a day's march of the walls? There was a fountain here over against us when we arrived; but the sun licked it up ere we saw him rise three times, dry and clean as a dog's red tongue licks a platter. For duty, it is watch and ward day by day, with your head-piece scorching the very hair of your brow, and alarms throughout the night, every time a camel tinkles its bell within or a jackal howls for hunger without. As to pleasure, if you care not to fly your hawks over a plain so barren that the very wormwood refuses to show a twig, or to follow a lion as sulky as yourself for lack of food, who burrows into a cave when you come up with him, you must be content to tie knots in your bow-string, and so keep count of the days of your captivity, as they pass by and bring no change."

"But you hold a high post," said Sarchedon absently, for his thoughts were still with the veiled figure that vanished so quickly from his sight. "You have a noble command, and great honour amongst men."

"And receive gifts from travellers entering in," added Sethos. "Caravans out of Egypt, merchants from the coast, spoilers of the desert, who must needs replenish quiver and sharpen steel, none can pass through without doing homage to the keeper of the gate, and his hand is never empty whose beard brushes the dust. Tell me, Agron, are there not bales of silk piled in thy dwelling, myrrh, spices, inlaid arms, and talents of gold, ay, and a captive maid or two, fresh and rosy as the dawn on those eastern mountains from which she comes?"

Agron laughed loud.

"How long would she abide with me at the gate, think you, after the prince had heard of her white skin and ruddy cheeks? No, my friends, wayfarers are driven from our walls as if they brought a pestilence in their very garments. For recompense, I have stern command and scornful look; for food, camel's flesh and dried locusts; for handmaiden, an Ethiopian wench, black and rough as a goat's-hair tent; and for drink—well, for drink—you are a king's cup-bearer, Sethos—I can give you, as you will presently confess, a skin of wine equal to the richest you ever pressed at dawn for

thirsty old Ninus. May he live for ever! Hush, man! we are now within the royal gate, and none speaks here above his breath who values the safety of his tongue."

Thus cautioning his companions, Agron guided them through a massive portal, into the central fortress of Ascalon, constructed to hold a foe at bay even in the last extremity, were the outer walls destroyed, and the town itself razed to the ground.

As a bulwark against Egyptian aggression, and a check to the excesses of those wild tribes that, from the earliest period of history, seem to have made the desert their home, Ascalon had been fortified with all the appliances of defence which the experience of Ninus could suggest; and perhaps, as the birthplace of the queen whom he loved so dearly, had acquired in his eyes a fictitious value that caused him to regard it with jealous and constant supervision. Its central fastness was therefore in proportion to the strength of the whole place, nor did it fail to impress both Sethos and Sarchedon with feelings of awe and wonder, quite incomprehensible to the light-hearted captain of the gate. For Agron, this lowering fortress seemed but a dreary prison, only preferable to the tomb, because of the hope that he might at last resume life and light amidst the luxuries of Babylon the Great. Ascalon, as the queen remembered it, was a glittering city, beautiful in architecture, pleasant with verdant bowers, and ripening dates, and voice of rushing waters. As Agron found it, shorn of beauty to enhance its strength, it was a grim solemn citadel, denuded of palm and paradise to make room for frowning rampart and threatening tower, drained of its bubbling streams that they might fill its moats and ditches, retaining nothing of its ancient loveliness but the blue sea and the silver lake, that continued to mirror its rugged features in age truly and faithfully as the smiling freshness of its youth.

Making signs to them of silence and discretion, the captain of the gate led his comrades through a succession of massive portals and vaulted passages, to a chamber lined with cedar wood, taken, as it were, out of the wall itself, and lit but sparingly by an aperture communicating with the roof.

"The prince will not see you," said he, "because he sits at the banquet of wine, and he holds by our ancient custom of Ashur, which forbids the clashing of cups and counsel; but you are fasting men as yet, and you may see him!"

Thus speaking, he drew aside a heavy curtain that had

hitherto darkened their hiding-place, and disclosed a sufficiently sumptuous banqueting-hall, in which feasted some twenty or thirty guests, of whom at least half a score were women, unveiled, with flushed cheeks, disordered raiment, and garlands of flowers clinging to their loosened hair.

Keen as the desert hawk's, Sarchedon's eye took in the gay assemblage at a glance. There was less of disappointment than relief in the deep breath he drew to miss the woman he loved amongst these restless, lavish, and alluring forms. Ninyas sat in their midst, gorgeously attired as was his wont, with a jewelled drinking-cup in hand, pledging his male guests at the lower end of the board with loud hilarity, or whispering softly in the ear of one of those fairer companions by whom he had surrounded himself. The good-humour of princes is contagious. To the royal challenge, men raised their goblets full and set them down empty; to the royal jest, women replied with peals of laughter and protestations of disapproval; while the royal whisper was answered by blush, and smile, and smothered sigh, more flattering than the wildest outbreak of mirth.

"I told you so," said Sethos in his friend's ear. "He was anxious about our embassy and could not remain in Babylon, but removed here to be nearer the land of Egypt."

"His mind seems easy enough now," answered Sarchedon; while Ninyas, taking a lotus-flower from his own garland, and steeping it in wine, twined it through the flowing locks of a free and laughing damsel, leaning across a comrade, till her head almost reclined on the prince's shoulder. As she suffered him to fasten the flower in her hair, it was evident to those watching above that she made some vehement though mirthful declaration, accompanied by many gestures of affected reluctance and denial; presently, on a remark of the prince, her retort called forth an overpowering burst of laughter, and Ninyas, taking the collar of gold from his neck, wound it as a bracelet round her arm.

In the meantime goblets had been emptied freely, eyes began to shine, voices to rise, and the confusion of tongues became every moment more and more unintelligible. The captain of the gate, though a stout warrior, possessed, like his two comrades, a leavening of that discretion which, even if laid aside in camp, cannot be dispensed with at court. He judged it time to retire.

"Those are full men down yonder," said he, with a meaning smile, "and ye up here are fasting from all but

desert air, and mayhap a mouthful or two of desert sand. Had you taken your places at the banquet amongst the others, with your feet washed, your locks combed, and garlands on your heads, there would have seemed no shame in all this revelry, because you too would have been merry with wine. That which is but decent mirth to one who rises from a feast, looks like rank folly to another who is about to sit down. Let us go hence, and you shall comfort your hearts with bread ere I show you the place of your repose. To-morrow Ninyas will speak with you face to face, in the light of the rising sun."

He conducted them accordingly to the lodging he himself occupied when not actually on duty at the city gate, placing before them such fare as, notwithstanding his protestations of its unworthiness, was exceedingly acceptable to their sharpened appetites, and producing a measure of Damascus wine, that even Sethos, in his official capacity, pronounced irreproachable. It proved, indeed, of so tempting a quality, that Agron seemed well inclined to let the gate take care of itself, while he assisted his guests in its consumption, expostulating earnestly with Sarchedon on his insensibility to the merits of this matchless vintage—"ripened," as he boasted, "in the brightest beams of an Assyrian sun, pressed by the whitest feet that ever danced under a mountain-maid, stored in royal cellars, and worthy, if ever wine was, to be placed before the cup-bearer of a king."

Sethos admitted its flavour, comparing it to that with which he had been regaled in Egypt at Pharaoh's own table, not disparagingly, yet so as to enhance in his listeners' esteem his own importance as a man of pleasure, a man of counsel, and a man of action.

"Their feasts," he observed gravely, "are spread more fairly than ours, their dishes are more sumptuous, their attendants more numerous. There is not the profusion of fish, flesh, and fowl that we waste in our land of Shinar; but dainties are brought at any cost from the extremities of Libya and the other side of the southern mountains. They would be ashamed to hear the heifer lowing in the court for her calf smoking on the board at which they sit, with knife in hand. Is it not so, Sarchedon? You tarried longer as a guest of Pharaoh than I did myself."

"My own experience is chiefly of prison fare," was the answer; "nevertheless, though the lodging was somewhat strait and gloomy, I can in no wise complain of the food. The bread of my captivity was meat and wine, not to mention

a barley-cake and a bunch of onions thrust into my hand by the archer who led me to my cell."

"Barley-cake and onions!" exclaimed Agron. "They fight passing well—I pray you suffer me to fill your cups—passing well, indeed, these nimble friends of ours, for men who fare no better than that!"

"Fight!" repeated Sethos, in high disdain. "Call you it fighting, forsooth, to set the battle in array, advancing in countless columns with levelled spears and waving banners, only to halt in orderly line, sound a trumpet, and retire discomfited before the sons of Ashur have time to bend their bows? Fight, comrades! I tell you, that for real fighting, man to man, hand to hand, foot to foot, and buckler to buckler, there is but one nation on the face of the earth."

"And but one champion in that nation," observed his host, with a covert smile at Sarchedon.

It was not lost on the merry nature of Agron, that his good wine already sang in the brain of the king's cup-bearer.

"You are my friend, and judge me too favourably," replied Sethos, in perfect good faith. "I am no boaster, by the quiver of Merodach! yet I may say, that this belt of mine girdles a man who never shrank from buffets with the Egyptian at a score, ay, a hundred to one! The sun has scarcely set since the chosen hosts of Pharaoh, his chief captains, his chariots and horsemen, surrounded me in the desert, as—as I surround this goblet in my grasp. Did I yield? Did I fly? No. I retired to—to draw them on, as it were, and loosen their array. What! thou art a warrior—thou knowest my cunning of defence—my skill"—

"In retreat?" asked the other, laughing outright.

Sethos gazed on him angrily, and tried to rise; but resuming his seat, burst out laughing too.

"In retreat, in advance," said he, "in press of battle—when and how you will. They came on at a gallop, with their spears down. I reined-in, and stood like a rock, with my wine-cup—I would say, with my bow—laid across my arm thus. Then I fitted an arrow to the string, and Sarchedon will bear me witness—Is it not so? Why, where is he? Surely he was here not a moment ago. Sarchedon, I say, will bear me"—

But turning round for better summons of this additional testimony to his valour, he found himself so unsteady, that he was fain to give up the search and the subject together, fixing his attention rather on the flagon, which he and his

host finished in company ere they sank into a sound and not entirely sober repose.

Sarchedon in the meantime, anxious and sick at heart, had risen from the revel unobserved, and retired to his assigned resting-place, where, notwithstanding the day's exertions, sad thoughts and burning memories banished sleep from his eyelids, peace from his troubled heart.

CHAPTER XXX

LOTH

A LOVER'S perceptions are not easily deceived; neither veil nor mantle can hide that subtle, mysterious idiosyncrasy which makes the one woman, while wholly distinct from the rest, a type and ideal of her sex. It was indeed Ishtar whom Sarchedon had seen amongst the spectators of his entry into Ascalon, nor is it necessary to add that she had recognised him almost ere he passed through the gate. In those long weary days since they parted, how many drink-offerings had she poured out—how many prayers had she offered—to Baal, Nebo, Merodach, all the host of heaven, especially to Ashtaroth, Queen of Love and Light! Behold them accepted and answered now! Her lover was in the same town with her; all the cunning she had practised to keep him at bay whose ardour she so loathed—her assumed fatigue, her feigned sickness, her feminine arts of defence—were to be rewarded at last. Doubtless she would meet Sarchedon in the streets—on the wall—what matter where?—before another sun had set; and to look in his face, if only once again, would be happiness enough for Ishtar. Her influence over the volatile young prince gave her authority in his household, so that she could roam unquestioned through all parts of the town and fortress where he reigned supreme. Sarchedon, tossing uneasily on his couch, little thought whose hand had trimmed the lamp by his head, strewn the rushes on his floor, and filled with the purest coldest water in Ascalon the pitcher that stood ready to his hand.

During the first watch of night, Ishtar paced to and fro in her own chamber, restless, perturbed, fevered with a wild joy far too keen for happiness, her whole being, sense, heart, and brain, filled with the image of the man she loved. When the archers had been relieved on the wall, and the spearman's echoing tread had died out among the ramparts, a well-known footfall passed along the gallery to her chamber:

she recognised, with indescribable fear and loathing, the step of the man who loved *her!*

Ninyas, weary of a banquet too late prolonged, of wine poured out too freely, tresses unbound too readily, smiles lavished ere he provoked them, and favours offered that he had little inclination to ask, broke up the sitting with less than his usual cordiality, and flung his festive garland under foot with something of the petulance shown by a spoiled child, that destroys its playthings because of the one unattainable gaud it has been forbidden to possess. His male attendants discreetly emptied their goblets and held their peace; but some of the women showed signs of displeasure and discontent ere they withdrew; Rekamat, indeed, a comely dame from the northern mountains beyond Nineveh, who deemed her own ruddy cheeks and amber hair too rare beauties thus to be wasted in Ascalon, spoke her mind freely enough.

"My lord is wroth," said she, "with his handmaidens, because, forsooth, we grudge neither word nor deed, dance nor song, to do him honour. Shall we not rejoice in the light of his countenance, as the golden fruit of the palm deepens under the rays of a southern sun? When the date is ripe it should be gathered ere it fall."

"The dates are musty, and the palm-tree bare," answered Ninyas; "I am weary of it all!"

"Let not the anger of my lord be kindled," replied Rekamat in a voice that betrayed considerable irritation, "while I tell him he is plunging his hand through the thorns to pluck a cluster of wild-grapes; he is pouring streams of fair water on a growth of bitter wormwood, and yoking a team of oxen to plough the desert sand. Oh, my lord, have you not free choice among all the birds of heaven? and cannot you refrain from the poor grey linnet that sits sad and moulting in her cage?"

"The linnet's plumage is sleek, and her song pleasant to hear," retorted Ninyas with a mocking laugh. "The vulture's neck is bare and peeled, her voice an ugly croak."

"I thank my lord for the comparison," replied Rekamat, now quivering with vexation. "He used not to think so when he hunted the lion under the walls of Nineveh: the vulture had bright eyes and sweet tones when she flapped her wings in Babylon before the Egyptian campaign, and my lord seemed well-pleased to find her hovering over him in Ascalon when he arrived with half a score of attendants, and a maiden swaddled up in sere-cloths on a dromedary.

Oh that I had never come here! never seen this hideous, hot, and hateful town! never, never, *never* looked on the face of my lord!"

Skilful in the science of such warfare, Rekamat burst into a storm of sobs, veiling her bright face with her delicate hands, to hide the tears, which were not perhaps forthcoming so freely as she could wish. It was no part of the prince's nature to soften at sight of a woman's distress, real or simulated. He laughed heartily now, and she turned on him like a tigress.

"My lord has yet to learn the first lessons of manhood!" she exclaimed. "What do I say? Am I not a fool to look for a warrior's beard on a boy's chin? Out on the smooth cheek and the white skin! Give me the heart, I say. As bright Ashtaroth is my witness, I would I were Prince Ninyas but for a single day!"

She was very handsome, with her burning cheeks and flashing eyes. It may be that all the evil in her listener's disposition woke up at her petulance and audacity; but his countenance remained unmoved, his voice seemed unusually gentle, while he asked, "Why?" She looked in his face scared, dominated by the quiet tones that to her feminine apprehension seemed more threatening than the loudest outbreak of wrath.

"Why?" she repeated. "Because I would cherish the faithful heart that beats only for me, while the stubborn slave who dared to mock my power should be thrust out with scorn into the wilderness."

"Have you done?" asked Ninyas, still in the same placid tones, with the same hard unchanging smile.

She fell at his feet now, and her tears began to flow in sad earnest. In her anger, she had been ready enough to run the risk of offending him; but she shrank from paying the penalty.

"I am but as dust in the sight of my lord," was her reply. "It is for the prince to command, and for his handmaid to obey."

"To-morrow, at dawn," said Ninyas, "you will sit in the gate of the city, with your garments rent and ashes scattered on your head. In the sight of archers and spearmen, and all the people of Ascalon, you will draw water from the well to wash the feet of Ishtar, as she takes her place of honour, doing homage to the beauty of her who is the chosen of your lord. I have spoken."

Then he turned coldly away, leaving the prostrate beauty

cowed and defeated, though maddened with the bitter prospect of her humiliation.

Notwithstanding his self-assertion, however, Ninyas proceeded on his undertaking with feelings of considerable annoyance and ill-humour. To be baffled by one woman was bad enough, but to be flouted for his failure by another was irritating in the extreme. He resolved that this trifling must be borne no longer, that the royal favour he offered must be accepted forthwith. What! the girl was in his power, after all! He had not wavered when her father lay slain on his own hearth; why should he hesitate now? She must be taught her lesson, here in this grim lonely fortress, and learn to accept with becoming gratitude the honours thrust upon her by the gods.

Bold, reckless, unfeeling, he possessed the chief elements of success; but he was young, and left out of his calculations the thousand wiles and stratagems through which, in all encounters of their wits, a man is invariably out-manœuvred by a woman. While he entered her chamber, the girl felt her heart stop beating and her whole frame tremble like a leaf. She dropped her veil, nevertheless, with a steady hand, standing erect, to all appearance calm and motionless as a statue. A flaring torch of pine-wood, dipped in pitch and fixed in a ring of bronze against the wall, shed its wavering glare on these two comely figures, playing over the sparkling jewels and festive garments of the one, while it deepened into gloom and mystery the shrouded outline of the other. Costly articles of furniture were scattered about the apartment, such as ivory couches, dressed skins of beasts, silken cushions, and tables of elaborate Egyptian carving. On one of these stood two jewelled cups, and a flagon sparkling with amber wine from the south.

Ninyas paused at the threshold; then advancing on that silent inmate, took her hand, and passed his arm round her waist.

"I have quitted lighted hall," said he, "and circling wine-cup, because of the Lily of Ascalon, without whom there seems no savour in the feast, no mirth in the revellers. My lily is drooping here in solitude—lo, I come to transplant her to a fairer garden and a richer soil."

Quick as thought she flashed one glance into his beautiful face, and made up her mind even while she looked.

"His servant felt cruelly disappointed that my lord bade her not to the banquet," was the deceitful answer. "It is to my shame and sorrow, if I have in any way displeased my lord."

Thus speaking, she disengaged herself gently from the encircling arm, and fell at his feet in an attitude that expressed the utmost humility, but made it exceedingly difficult for Ninyas to embrace her again.

"You know," said he, "that you are always welcome to your prince. Come when she will and how she will, he only desires to lay the lily on his bosom, and place Ishtar beside him on a throne."

"Then my lord is no longer wroth with his handmaid," said she, unveiling and rising to her feet, while she called into her beautiful eyes a look that thrilled her admirer to the core. "I have sat here silent and sad, thinking that the cloud between us was never to pass away. Lo, my lord looks favourably on his servant, and she is glad in the light of his smile once more."

Rejoiced, no less than surprised, by the happy turn matters seemed to have taken, pluming himself also on his own wisdom in having left her for a space to herself, all the heart Ninyas possessed flew to his lips while he exclaimed—

"I love you, Ishtar! love you better than power, riches, a warrior's fame, a king's throne, the wine I drink, the very air I breathe! Oh, I love you so, my pure and precious pearl, that I sometimes think the pleasure can never pay me for the pain!"

Fickle, self-indulgent, unstable as he was, yet in the fierce impulsive ardour of his youth he meant it—honestly and heartily—for the time. Ishtar could not repress a sense of triumph in the consciousness of her power—a power that should serve to baffle the gaoler even now, and unlock the prison door. His eyes followed her with fond glances, while she moved to the table and filled a wine-cup to the brim. It must have been a colder nature than his that could resist the winning grace with which she offered him to drink.

"My lord will not refuse to pledge his handmaid," said she, "in token of forgiveness and good-will?"

He emptied the cup at a draught; for indeed to this impulsive young prince there was a keen zest in every phase of luxury and indulgence: the lust of the eye, the pleasures of the senses, feast and frolic, wine and women—he loved them all too well. It was the strongest vintage of the south, and, succeeding his previous potations, its effects were apparent at once. His cheek paled, his glance wandered, there came a thickness in his speech, while he sank among shawls and cushions, inviting Ishtar to sit beside him on the couch.

Though it sickened her, she suffered him to caress her hands, her arms, the fragrant wealth of her flowing hair. Once more she filled for him. Once more he drank to her beauty, her promotion, her coming happiness.

She had ceased to fear him now; for the strong wine, though it blazed in his eyes and inflamed his senses, fastened his limbs, like a chain of iron, to the couch. Stretching his arms back to embrace her with the caressing gesture of a child, he looked up in her face, betraying even more of mirth than either love or longing in his own.

She watched him, as the physician watches the sick man about to die; and though an icy cold crept over her, she never smiled more sweetly than while she took his beautiful head in her hands and pillowed it on her own beating heart. In that fair smooth bosom thoughts of agony and horror were lurking, as there are foul monsters and hideous secrets, wrecks and remnants and dead men's bones, hidden beneath the smiling surface of the sea. She longed for the wine to work its office—all the more wildly that he wore a dagger in his girdle—and she prayed with her whole heart she might not be driven to use *that*.

Softly, sweetly, she sang him a drowsy lullaby, not a quiver on her lip nor tremble in her voice, while she soothed him with tender care, like a mother hushing off her child.

"Sleep, my love, sleep; rest, my love, rest:
Dieth the moan of the wind in the tree,
Foldeth her pinions the bird in her nest,
Sinketh the sun to his bed in the sea.
Sleep, sleep—lull'd on my breast,
Tossing and troubled, and thinking of me.

Hush, my love, hush; with petals that close,
Bowing and bending their heads to the lea,
Fainteth the lily, and fadeth the rose,
Sighing and sad for desire of the bee.
Hush, hush; drooping like those,
Weary of waking and watching for me.

Peace, my love, peace; falleth the night,
Veiling in shadows her glory for thee:
Eyes may be darken'd, while visions are bright,
Senses be fettered, though fancy is free.
Peace, peace; slumbering light,
Longing and loving and dreaming of me."

At last! He would not wake now till dawn. She kept her eyes from his dagger, lest she might be tempted to make too sure; then disengaged herself with cautious sinuous dexterity from the undisturbed sleeper, and, slipping the ring off his finger, stole noiseless as a shadow from the place.

CHAPTER XXXI

WILLING

HURRYING through the corridors of the fortress, she passed the chamber where Sethos and Agron, who had assiduously emptied their flagon, were sleeping that sound and dreamless sleep, from which men are with difficulty aroused until the draughts they have swallowed cease to affect the brain. Neither had taken much thought in bestowing himself decently to rest. The cup-bearer, stretched on the floor, still grasped a goblet in his hand; while the captain of the gate, retaining, as it seemed, some vague consciousness that his duties demanded unceasing vigilance, remained seated at the table, his head pillowed on his arms, his whole faculties so steeped in slumber that an enemy might have stormed the walls and penetrated to the heart of the fortress, yet scarcely disturbed his repose. With womanly foresight and precaution, Ishtar snatched a loaf of bread and a handful of dates from the board, lifted mantle, bow and quiver from the corner where these had been flung aside, and went her way.

Sarchedon, tossing restlessly on his couch, courted sleep in vain. To no purpose had he quaffed draughts of pure cold water, extinguished his torch, and resolved to force his faculties into repose. The veiled figure he had seen on entering the gate thrust itself on his senses. It might have been—it must have been—Ishtar! She was in the same town, perhaps under the same roof. And if so, what had been her fate since they parted? How came she in Ascalon, but by a violence and treachery that could only have the basest object, the cruellest results? Each after each, these maddening thoughts seemed to goad and sicken him like successive stabs, when their current was suddenly arrested by a light step on his chamber-floor, the faint rustle of a garment at his side. Starting to his feet with an exclamation of defiance, it was smothered ere spoken by a soft hand laid to his lips, while the dear familiar voice murmured in his ear—

"Sarchedon, my beloved, it is I—your own Ishtar. Hush, for your life! Be silent, be obedient, and follow me."

Was he dreaming? Was he in his right senses? This, at least, could be no illusion of fancy. The glowing form panted in his arms, the sweet lips were glued to his own. Even in that crisis of danger and suspense she could spare him a moment of rapture, in her clinging close embrace. If these were dreams—he prayed to Ashtaroth—let him never wake again!

But despite of—perhaps because of—her affection, the woman retained all her faculties, her common sense and presence of mind, while the man was lost and bewildered in the tumult of his unexpected happiness. She girded the sword on his thigh with her own hands, buckled Agron's bow and quiver at his back, whispered caution once more, and so led him through gloomy passage and vaulted archway to the outer court. Here the starlight showed him the loving eyes, the fair fond face, he had thought never to see again but in his dreams. Looking down on that pure open brow, angry suspicions, hideous misgivings fled from his troubled spirit, as evil dreams and phantoms of the night vanish with dawn of day.

"I am happy now," she murmured, "and I am safe. To-morrow it would have been too late!"

But for this timely avowal, he might have urged her with a thousand ill-advised questions, productive only of delay. Now he pressed the hand that guided him gratefully to his lips, and she knew that he thanked her from his inmost heart.

"We have not a moment to lose," she whispered, as they made for one corner of the court, where a continuous chewing of provender, and an indistinct mass topped by two or three swan-like necks and motionless heads, denoted that certain camels were at rest. "By to-morrow's dawn we must be many leagues from Ascalon, and it is now the middle watch of night. The dromedary that brought me here is the fleetest in all the land of Shinar. He laughs at the wild ass, and scorns the desert wind in its wrath. Sarchedon, my beloved, if you and I were mounted on him, a single bow-shot outside the gate, we should be safe!"

"They have fleet steeds," he answered, thinking of Merodach, and wishing the good horse stood ready saddled for him now.

"Steeds!" she repeated. "The fleetest that ever spurned sand would labour after that ill-favoured beast like gorged

vultures after the long-winged hawk of the desert. Rouse him, Sarchedon, and fasten our provender to his side. Beware! he is surly and savage; but he can travel far and fast, untiring as a ship on the sea, swift as a bird in the air."

Thus speaking she helped him to secure the trappings of the unwilling dromedary, disturbed from its repose, not without many angry protestations, couched in discordant screams and fierce attempts to bite. It was not long ere he had mounted and placed her behind him on the creature's back, which then rose slowly to its knees and feet, stretched its long neck with an inquiring gesture into the darkness, blew the dust out of its nostrils, and shuffled with awkward sidelong gait into the town.

Those soft spongy feet roused no echo in the streets. The dromedary passed on under its burden, like an ungainly ghost, without disturbing spearman in the fortress or archer on the wall. When the gate was reached, however, the fugitives found it too well guarded. In Agron's absence, his subordinate was prepared to be unusually vigilant and alert. The watchman challenged from the rampart, the archers mustered by scores, bending their bows; a single torch shed its light on the officer's warlike face and weapons, the clamps of the ponderous doors, Sarchedon's bow and quiver, the dromedary's sullen head, and the feet and hands of Ishtar, as she sat exalted over all.

"None can pass out after nightfall," said the officer, levelling his spear. "Turn back your beast, and go your way. You can come hither again at dawn."

Sarchedon felt the hand of Ishtar press his shoulder as though to inculcate silence and caution. Trusting to her resources he held his peace.

"Where is the captain of the gate?" said she, in a tone of anger deep and imperious as a man's. "I demand to see Agron; we do not speak with a common spearman of matters pertaining to the Great King."

His instincts of discipline bade him screen his commander, while he obeyed an appearance of authority so well sustained.

"Let not my lord be wroth," said he, peering up into the darkness, in hope of recognising the high official with whom he spoke. "The captain of the gate is even now visiting his watchmen on the wall. At his return he will doubtless give my lord liberty to pass out. In the meantime the royal orders are strict. May the King live for ever!"

Whispering to an archer, he bade him run with all speed,

and apprise Agron of the difficulty, but showed no disposition to relax his own vigilance at the gate.

"Fool!" exclaimed Ishtar, in the same deep tones. "Will you wear your head to-morrow at sunrise? or do you wish it set here over the gate, while your body is flung from the wall to make a morning meal for the jackals? Know you not this token? Do you dare disavow the signet of Ninyas in his own royal abode?"

She held out the ring stripped from the prince's finger in his drunken sleep, and was not surprised to see the Assyrian officer prostrate himself humbly before the jewel. He thought the manner of its forthcoming unaccountable and irregular, the hand that tendered it strangely white and delicate; but that was no affair of his. The prince's signet, here in Ascalon, conferred supreme authority on its bearer, and he must simply obey. He lowered his spear; the archers unstrung their bows; the heavy gate swung back; the dromedary paced leisurely through; and Sarchedon was alone with Ishtar in the desert—free!

They made but little haste while within bow-shot of the walls. To arouse suspicion would have been fatal. The stars gave light enough for a practised archer to make sure of his mark. But when they had traversed a few furlongs, Sarchedon could not resist a smothered cry of triumph, while he urged the dromedary to its speed. The air from the sea blew fresh and pleasant, lifting his locks and cooling his temples as he hurried on, while every sense seemed sharpened, every muscle strengthened by the rapidity of his flight. Behind him was sorrow, outrage, and imprisonment; before him freedom, love, and joy. He could scarce control his feelings; for was not Ishtar leaning on his shoulder? and had he not gained all he desired in the world?

Looking back in the beloved face of her who was to share his future, it startled him to see it so pale, that in the starlight it was like the face of a corpse. She had borne up bravely through difficulty and danger; but when the crisis was past, and she knew her lover in safety, the strength that self-sacrifice and devotion afford a woman at her need failed her without warning; and she sank heavily against Sarchedon, faint, helpless, inanimate, but clinging round him to the last.

So the stars paled, the sky brightened, turning to pearly grey, and clear faint green, primrose, orange, crimson, and molten gold. The sun rose in his glory, bathing earth and heaven in floods of dazzling light. The sand glowed, the waste widened, and still the dromedary travelled on with

free unfaltering strides, swift, straight, and noiseless like an arrow from a bow.

Ninyas, waking out of his heavy slumbers, looked about him in a dim confusion of thoughts that gradually resolved themselves to a sense of irritation tinged with shame. The voice of Ishtar still seemed ringing in his ears, signs of her presence — jewels, garments, articles of feminine luxury— were strewed about the apartment; but she who made the charm of all was nowhere to be found. He called, he clapped his hands, he rose, yawned, stretched himself, and observing his finger bared of its accustomed jewel, the whole truth flashed on him at a glance.

He actually trembled with rage and self-contempt. To have been put off so long, and thus outwitted at last! He could have inflicted on her the severest punishment in all the code of Assyrian cruelty, and laughed her to scorn the while, had she been within reach. His perceptions, especially where self was concerned, were vivid enough; and the loss of his signet showed him too clearly that not only had the bird escaped from his hand, but that she was beyond the walls ere now, flown out of reach for evermore.

He had as yet vouchsafed no audience to the fugitives from Egypt, and had indeed taken little notice of their arrival, reported during his protracted carouse; so he was ignorant that Sarchedon had been his guest for a night, and thus repaid his hospitality. It was maddening enough, however, without this aggravation, to reflect that the woman he proposed so to honour, should have preferred to his royal favour the danger and hardships of a sudden flight into the wilderness. Ninyas felt he must avenge himself on anything and everything that came to hand. The captain of the gate was obviously the first person to be interrogated, brow-beaten, and disgraced.

Agron, collecting his faculties after his debauch, and learning with some anxiety, from the report of his subordinate, that the gate had been opened by royal order before the morning watch, was in no wise reassured when he received a summons to attend the prince forthwith. Bold as he had proved himself many a day in battle, his cheek paled, and his fingers trembled, so that he could hardly draw the buckle of his girdle, or straighten the quiver at his back.

Ninyas had bathed his temples, combed out his abundant locks, and adjusted his apparel. Not a trace of his late excess was perceptible save a slight flush, which perhaps

rather enhanced the beauty of his delicate cheek; and only those who knew him well could have detected in the mocking calm of that fair womanly face signs of a storm that would burst anon. Agron, however, while he prostrated himself before his lord, felt that he was a doomed man.

"I missed you from the banquet yesterday," said Ninyas, with exceeding graciousness; "was it that my trusty captain remained to handle bow and spear at the gate, rather than wine-cup at the board?"

"The prince hath spoken," answered Agron, steadying his voice by an effort.

"Not a mouse could have crept through, then, without your sanction," continued his lord. "Oh, I know your vigilance, and shall reward it richly as it deserves."

Agron could but listen and tremble.

"The fleetest dromedary in the land of Shinar was tethered in the court of the fortress when the sun set yesterday. I have heard it passed out of Ascalon, bearing a double burden, before the morning watch. Are these things so?"

It was obvious that the prince had already made himself acquainted with the truth. Agron only faltered out—

"The rider bore the royal signet. What am I, that I should canvass the commands of my lord?"

The voice of Ninyas grew softer, his manner more gentle every moment.

"You are an Assyrian captain," said he, "a trained man of war from your youth. Rehearse me, lest I forget them, your duties as chief watchman at the gate."

Agron felt that the shadow of death was overtaking him fast, while he replied—

"Thy servant quits not his post on any pretence until relieved, but at the express command of my lord. He visits the walls."

"Enough!" exclaimed the prince, bursting into fury at last, while his cheeks kindled, his eyes blazed, and he looked like an angel possessed by a fiend. "Coward! and slave! out of your own mouth you are judged, by your own words you are condemned! All last night you were absent from your post, passing the wine-cup, striking the timbrel—what do I know or care? And the gate of Ascalon was left open and unguarded as the great market-place in Babylon. For such an offence there is a fitting punishment, never yet remitted amongst the sons of Ashur. Cover his face, and lead him forth! I have spoken."

Then, while the archers in attendance seized on their late

commander to fulfil the awful sentence, Ninyas turned with a calm brow and sweet smile to a stately official standing near, and said—

"Those fugitives from Egypt — I can attend to their matters now. Bring them into my presence."

The official seemed greatly troubled.

"Let not my lord consume me utterly in his displeasure," said he. "One of them hath escaped in the night, and there is but one left."

It was in vain to calculate the prince's changing moods. He laughed aloud.

"The more fool he to stay in the town since the gate stood open," was his reply. "Put him in the fortress-dungeon, and keep him there on bitter waters and bread of affliction till I send to bring him out. Now lead the horses round, and unhood the hawks. I have done enough justice for one sitting. Let us ride forth into the wilderness to take a prey!"

CHAPTER XXXII

BREAD AND SALT

THE dromedary travelled fast; but its pace, rough and fatiguing even to Sarchedon's athletic frame, was especially trying to his companion. Anxiety and agitation had done their usual work; so that when Ishtar recovered from her swoon, refreshment and a short interval of repose seemed absolutely necessary, if she was to continue her journey through the night. Towards noon, therefore, her companion thought it wise to halt at a convenient resting-place, where a clump of palms flung their slender shadows over a desert spring; and while the dromedary, after drinking its fill, browsed on the few dried shoots afforded by the scanty vegetation of the wilderness, Sarchedon did all that a lover's care and a traveller's experience could suggest for her comfort who was thus confided to his affection.

"You were wise," said he, forcing on her a share of their provision, "to carry off this morsel of food from Agron's table. I know the stations well at which we can halt to drink, and that good beast yonder, though he will grow leaner and leaner, can journey on with unfailing strength till the sun has risen twice again. Eat, then, and spare not; for on the edge of the desert, when we have passed the bitter sea of the plain, there are cities of refuge, where we can obtain such food as we require for man and beast, ere we go on our way rejoicing to the country between the rivers and the cool mountains of the north."

"Your path is mine," answered Ishtar, with a fond smile; "I am not so faint and weak of heart now, but I am very weary, and would fain sleep."

He disposed his mantle so as to shade her yet more securely from the pitiless sun, pillowed her head on his own broad breast, and watched her slumbers with feelings pure and holy as his whose loving eyes are resting on the face of the dead. Presently he became himself heavy with sleep, and strove in vain to keep his faculties on the alert. He

could not move a limb without disturbing his charge, and it was not long ere his sight grew dim, his head began to droop: with keen searching glances he swept the horizon round, and then gave way, dropping at once into a deep and dreamless sleep. The sun was low when he woke with a start that roused his companion also. The snorts and restless motions of the dromedary, straining at its tether, denoted danger. The sleepers sprang to their feet, and looked in each other's faces with anxious eyes.

That danger was indeed very near. A cloud of dust had approached within a furlong. Through its dusky veil could be heard and seen the tramp of horses, the glitter of spears.

"They must be Philistines!" "It is Ninyas!" were the exclamations that rose to their lips; while Sarchedon, snatching the broken loaf and few remaining dates from off the sand, released the dromedary, lifted Ishtar hastily to her seat, and took his own place before her on the animal's back. Urging it to the utmost, he was painfully conscious that although swifter and more enduring for a long journey, it was not so nimble as a horse in an effort of a few furlongs. Ere it had attained its full speed, the enemy were within bow-shot. Already an archer had halted and was taking aim.

Stung with the knowledge that, from their relative positions, he was shielded by the body of Ishtar, Sarchedon pursued his flight in an oblique direction, guiding the dromedary now to the right, now to the left, in such alternate curves and bends as he thought might baffle the hostile marksman. An injury to the beast on which their safety depended would, he knew, be only less fatal than the wounding of Ishtar herself.

The Philistine dismounted to draw his bow with exceeding care and precision. Sarchedon felt the dromedary wince beneath him. In a few more paces the animal's speed sensibly slackened; and, looking back, it sickened him to see certain red drops soaking in on its track through the sand. The successful archer had remounted to follow his companions, who were rapidly nearing the fugitives.

"It is hard," muttered Sarchedon, grinding his teeth in rage and despair. "But ten out of all the horsemen of Assyria would suffice to bring us through, and for the want of them we must perish. We are forgotten of Nisroch, and are doomed!"

Ishtar's face turned very pale, while she pressed her lips on his shoulder, and murmured—

"Better even here, my beloved, than in Ascalon! Behold, the time is come, and in death we shall not be divided!"

Their pace was now reduced to a walk: the arrow had sped deeply home, and the dromedary, pierced through its loins, tottered at every step. The Philistines gathered round, calling on their prey to halt. Sarchedon glanced at his own weapons—a bow, some half-score shafts, and a short straight sword. Then he measured the strength of his opponents—fifty horsemen at least; champions of exceeding stature, fierce and terrible; children of Anak; objects of dread even to the warlike sons of Ashur—in arms against all men, holding their tenure of the wilderness by right of bow and spear.

The dromedary stopped, drooping its head, groaning and shivering in sore fear and pain. Sarchedon made signs of surrender by unstringing his bow and casting it on the sand. The tallest of the Anakim threw up the spear he had levelled, and reined his horse alongside of the dromedary; his tribe gathering round, hemmed in their captives with an armed circle. Sarchedon was ordered to dismount. While he obeyed, Ishtar too alighted nimbly on the ground. She had scarcely touched it ere the dromedary sank to its knees, struggled, and turned over on its side. In the shock, that loaf of broken bread on which the ill-fated pair depended for support, rolled to the leader's feet, and he lifted it greedily from the earth. He had not tasted food for many hours, and instinctively began eating, even while he gave directions to secure their prisoners.

Here and there, like a scurf of mildew incrusted on some prison wall, a white saline crystallisation flecked the sand at their feet. Ishtar, separated from her lover, sprang at the chief's hand, tore from him a morsel of the broken loaf, dipped it in these shining particles, swallowed it hastily, and seizing the hem of his coarse homespun garment, claimed the protection of her act.

"Bread and salt!" said she, "the host's honour—the guest's right! I demand the safeguard of bread and salt!"

It was unanswerable. To have renounced the duties such an appeal exacted would have been to forfeit rank, character, respect in the tribe, authority in his own tent. Had she been his deadly enemy, thirsting for his blood, who had slain his kindred, carried off his maidens, defiled his father's grave, there was no help for it—she had eaten of his bread and salt! Henceforth his relations with her must be those of courtesy, friendship, and support—even to drawing of sword and bending of bow in time of need.

"It is enough!" said the chief; turning to his followers:

"Place the damsel on my own steed—I will myself lead it gently to our tents. For her companion, he at least is a captive and a slave. Disarm him, and bind him fast. Bread and salt is the only obligation I regard, and I swear, maiden, by your own comeliness, you were but just in time."

He laughed while the last morsel disappeared down his stalwart throat. Ishtar, casting longing looks at Sarchedon, could not refrain from tears. The Anakim had taken his sword from his thigh, and bound him securely with his own bow-string. He learned by the chief's gestures that Ishtar was safe for the present from insult or ill-usage, and this was his only consolation. Standing, too, among his captors, he saw how hopeless would have been resistance, even had there ridden at his back those ten Assyrian horsemen he longed for so heartily but now. Himself a man of goodly stature and powerful frame, he did not fail to remark that the least of these giants towered fully a span over his own head, while their weighty limbs and fierce bearing brought to mind all the stories he had heard of their warlike prowess, their haughty defiance of Ninus himself, who hugely admired,—while he waged a war of extermination against them,—the many deeds of desperate courage for which they were celebrated, and the marvellous strength which made a common proverb of the question, "Who shall stand before the children of Anak?"

It was natural enough for these sons of the desert to show considerable interest in the dying dromedary. An animal of such extraordinary qualities, as their critical eyes told them it possessed, would have been a far more precious capture in the wilderness than a score of maidens beautiful as Ishtar, a host of warriors stalwart as Sarchedon. A creature that, travelling on without stint or pause, from rise to set of sun, could leave their fleetest horses panting many a league behind, was simply the most valuable property a robber by profession could possess. Therefore, not until the last resources of their skill and experience had been exhausted to preserve life, did they turn sorrowfully from its carcass to the rider who had fallen into their hands.

There seemed some difficulty in disposing of him. Two loose mares, indeed, followed by their foals, had galloped up with the troop; but of these the chief, twisting his bow-string into a halter, mounted one, while the cumbrous furniture of the dead dromedary was packed on the other. Sarchedon could hardly be expected to keep pace with his conquerors on foot, and they took counsel accordingly.

"Better slay the Assyrian where he stands," said a swarthy

giant, coolly balancing the profit and loss of retaining an inconvenient prisoner. "The sand is hot, the way weary. It seems cruel to bid him walk, and men like us, my brothers, cannot ask their steeds to bear a double burden." He looked proudly round on his kindred, adding conclusively—"Besides, we have mouths enough to fill in the tents where our wells are already dry, and there is no millet left to grind!"

"You have said it, my brother!" exclaimed his nearest comrade, tall and savage as himself, raising, while he spoke, the spear that Sarchedon felt another movement of that brawny arm would drive home to his heart. Nevertheless, his eye quailed not, nor did his cheek turn pale. A true son of Ashur, he could look death in the face without flinching. The striker paused with grim approving smile. His comrades, gathering round, expressed in hoarse gutturals their admiration of such manly courage.

Ishtar's looks had never left her lover. Riding beside the chief, she caught him by the garment, and claimed his interference.

"I am your guest," said she, "here in the open desert, even as under the shadow of your tents. All of mine should be sacred in your eyes, and I call upon you to save that man's life."

In two bounds of his lean active mare he was beside the prisoner, and his powerful grasp had seized the threatening arm.

"Hold!" he thundered out. "If I see fit, I will reserve that work for myself. And now, damsel," he added, turning to Ishtar, "you claim this man's body, and why?"

Trembling with fear, she could only think of one unanswerable plea.

"I am his wife," she answered, blushing, with downcast eyes.

"His wife!" repeated the chief. "Who is he, then?"

Thoughts of ransom, flight, freedom, flitted through her brain, all to be accomplished with less difficulty by the prisoner of humble grade.

"I will speak truth to my lord," said she, "and so find favour in his sight. His servant is but a simple archer in the hosts of the king of Assyria."

"What are you doing here in the wilderness," was the next inquiry, "many days' journey from the walls of Babylon and the footstool of the Great King?"

"The servant of my lord has been a prisoner in the land of Egypt," replied Ishtar; "he was taken by the spearmen of

Pharaoh. I followed him into captivity, and ministered unto him till we found a fitting time to escape."

"But the dromedary?" pursued her questioner.

"We stole it," she answered simply; and the son of Anak became less inclined to doubt the probability of her statement.

"An archer?" he repeated, pondering, as it seemed, with all his might. "But for the damsel herself, the tale seems likely enough; yet must the wives of his captains be marvellously fair, when a mere bowman in the Great King's host can come by so white a skin as that! Nevertheless," he added, turning to Ishtar, "if he be in truth an archer, and you his wife, no doubt he can bend a bow to some purpose, and you are not afraid to trust his skill. We shall prove you both on the spot."

With these words, he halted his followers and gave them the order to dismount. Sarchedon's arms were then freed, and a heavy bow, requiring no slight strength to draw, was placed in his hands. Though surprised, they laughed to observe that he was equally master of the weapon with the tallest man in their tribe. One of the band then measured out, spear-length by spear-length, the distance of a furlong on the desert sand. It seemed a considerable flight for an arrow; but every child of Anak was bowman from his youth, just as he was horseman, swordsman, spearman, and spoiler of all who came across his path. The chief himself, lifting Ishtar from the saddle, led her to the spot his follower had marked out. Then, taking off his own belt, he buckled it so as to form a loop half a cubit in diameter.

"Hold this in your hand," said he, "and stretch your arm to the farthest. If an archer of the Great King is skilful as the Assyrians boast, he can drive me a shaft through that loop without risk to a hair of his wife's head."

In vain Sarchedon protested; in vain he entreated that he might be pitted against the fiercest champion of the tribe with sword or spear, foot to foot and breast to breast.

"No," said the Anakim; "the damsel told us he was an archer. As an archer he shall be proved. Surely it is the wife's duty to give life, if need be, for her lord."

Not a shade was on Ishtar's brow, not a tinge of fear in eye, mouth, or attitude, while she stood there over against him, firm, erect, and beautiful; but Sarchedon felt his heart turn sick, his head swim, as he thought with horror of the result, should his hand fail him, or the desert wind divert the arrow but a cubit from its course.

He could not; no, he could not. Once, twice, he took

aim—slowly, steadily, with true unfaltering eye—but the third time his powerful arm drew the bow to its utmost compass, directing its shaft at the sky, and sending it high over Ishtar's head, to quiver in the earth as far behind her as the marksman stood in front.

"An archer! an archer!" exclaimed the Anakim with one accord. "Not a man of us, with the wind against him, could have measured such a flight as that!"

"An archer, and a good one," assented their leader; "but the damsel is no wife of his, nevertheless. If he were indeed her lawful lord, he had not surely weighed the scratch of an arrow on her skin against his own freedom and his life."

CHAPTER XXXIII

PARTED

THUS arguing according to his lights, the chief directed that Sarchedon should be secured once more, and, much to the dissatisfaction of the troop, that they should place him on their horses in rotation, journeying by turns on foot. Although Ishtar failed to make as good terms for her lover as for herself, she had in no way forfeited the protection she acquired so discreetly, and rode by their leader's side, at the head of the band, as an honoured guest rather than the captive of his bow and spear. Nevertheless, all her thoughts were engrossed by his welfare whom she so dearly loved; her whole mind was bent on forming some scheme for his security and freedom. Alas! it was to no purpose that she wrung her hands and racked her brain. Sarchedon had fallen into the power of men for whom human life and human suffering were of less account than the wormwood that lay bruised beneath their horses' feet. If a captive proved troublesome, what matter? It was but the push of a spear, and they were rid of him once for all.

Nevertheless, these children of Anak, though possessing themselves on occasion with the strong hand of whatsoever they desired, had yet, like other spoilers, peaceful relations with certain traders whose propensities for barter could be of inestimable value to men against whom every gate was barred, every wall guarded, through all the cities of the plain. With these merchants their dealings were honourable enough, the man of trade seldom failing to make exorbitant profit from his transactions with the man of war. This mutual barter comprised almost every one of the ruder articles required for support or destruction of life. Horses, arms, camels, dates,

bread, honey, mare's-milk cheeses, even goodly raiment of needlework, were exchanged freely; while a fair-faced maiden to adorn the tent—a stalwart youth to keep the herds—were more than all other merchandise sought after and desired. Thus it came to pass that Sarchedon, though out of favour with his captors—who, like most practised horsemen, cared not to journey much on foot—escaped a fate that seemed imminent each time some wrathful giant dismounted to make room for the prisoner, and swore freely, by his gods, that if this inconvenience was to continue through another day, he would take such order with the Assyrian as should prevent him from ever riding on horseback again.

Night was falling fast when the troop approached the encampment of their tribe; a temporary residence to be broken up and removed at an hour's notice, on the slightest occasion. Rude goats'-hair tents were scattered here and there, scarcely visible in the deepening gloom. Two or three camels lay at rest amongst half a score of horses, fastened by the forefoot, that neighed, screamed, and fought savagely, whenever the loosening of their tethers permitted them to approach each other within striking distance. A few giants, sauntering lazily about, took little notice of the new arrivals, and their tall stately women scarcely lifted veil for a glance of curiosity, so busied were they in twisting bow-strings, repairing harness, grinding corn, pressing cheeses, or baking loaves in the embers of a scanty fire for their lords; but two swarthy travel-worn men, looking like dwarfs amongst the towering figures that surrounded them, came forward to accost the chief with words of extravagant welcome and looks of eager curiosity. These were traders from the north, who examined the veiled figure of Ishtar with professional interest, expecting, no doubt, to secure a golden profit by her purchase.

In this hope they were disappointed. With extreme courtesy the chief of the Anakim conducted her to a tent standing beside his own, in which, after a long loving look at Sarchedon, she disappeared, and was seen no more.

The Anakim seemed well pleased to find these dealers, with whom they had so often traded, thus inmates of their camp. The leader, after disposing of his fair guest by consigning her to the care of a stately beauty, tender of heart as she was gigantic of frame, came out to meet them, and at once broached a proposal that found immediate favour with his followers.

"The captive is a goodly youth," said he; "a stout warrior, an expert archer—tall and strong too for an Assyrian.

What say you? These northern merchants are our brothers —shall we not sell him to them for a price?"

"Let him go," exclaimed his listeners with one accord; "he is fair, he is precious, he is a man, even amongst the children of Anak. But the traders from the north have eaten of our bread and drunken from our cup. All we possess is theirs, and they shall have him—at a price!"

Then the elder of the traders—keen-eyed, voluble, energetic —put in his word—

"You have many mouths to feed, my brothers, here within your tents. Millet grows scarce, and the wells are running dry from day to day. We also have a long journey before us in the desert. Our water-skins are empty, our camels overloaded. What have we to do with a captive who eats and drinks, yet must be carried from day to day like a bale of goods? How are your servants to bring this encumbrance with them from city to city, till they reach their home in the mountains beyond the great rivers of the plain?"

"You will sell him for a talent of gold in the first market you enter," was the answer. "Is he not a comely youth? Fair and strong and of a ruddy countenance? We have taken no such prey since we rode, without ceasing, four days and nights to spoil the City of Palms, by the western sea."

"The Assyrians have more slaves than enough," answered the trader, "since they brought captives up from Egypt, by scores and by hundreds, at the chariot-wheels of the Great King. Nevertheless, are we not brothers? You shall deliver him as a gift, and take two suits of raiment in exchange."

"He is yours, my brother," said the chief, "and my tents are yours; my horses, my camels, my handmaidens; the sword on my thigh, and the bow in my hand. But shall I give my brother ripened dates and receive from him only their broken shells? Add to the raiment a measure of myrrh, at least, and three cruses of oil."

"With a new pack-saddle," suggested a bystander, whose own camel-furniture had reached the last stage of decay; while a dozen more took up the cry, insisting on such articles as each thought necessary to his own comfort or equipment.

"Some twisted rope for hobbles!"

"A bale of silk from Tyre!"

"Two skins of wine of Eshcol!"

"An embossed girdle!"

"A shield of brass!"

"A score of new bow-strings!"

"Or fifty shekels of silver, and no more said," exclaimed

the trader, turning from side to side, with the air of a man overcome by his own liberality.

"Add to them a hundred," urged the chief; "and go thy way, thou and thy camels and thy servants, with the goodly slave I have given thee."

"One hundred shekels, and he is mine," returned the trader, placing his hand on the Assyrian's shoulder in token of ownership; and thus becoming the possessor of Sarchedon at something less than the price of a good horse. Regret was fruitless—resistance impossible. Bound hand and foot he could but grind his teeth, and submit.

The merchants made ready their camels forthwith, taking advantage of the coolness of night to journey through the desert, and guiding their course by the pilotage of the stars. So noiseless was their departure, after the bustle of concluding their bargain subsided, that they had disappeared with her lover in the darkness ere Ishtar knew they were clear of the encampment. Seeking the spot where she had last seen Sarchedon, to find it empty, the maddening truth flashed upon her, and she could bear no more. Sick, faint, despairing, she uttered one plaintive cry, and fell senseless on the sand.

The first of the tribe who found her, lifted that drooping form, with the ease and something of the pitiful admiration with which he would have picked up a broken lily, and bore her gently to the chief's tent. Here she was tended carefully during the night, its gigantic owner stepping softly to its entrance at intervals to assure himself of her state. With morning she was able to rise, and as her faculties resumed their vigour, she realised the whole force of the blow that had fallen.

Ishtar's nature, however, was one which is only found amongst women. Shrinking instinctively from everything approaching to pain or danger—fond, trusting, sensitive, and docile—she could yet brave and endure all things on behalf of those she loved; identifying herself so wholly with their welfare as to forget her own fears, her own weakness, and combining with the martyr's patient courage that cheerful energy which, looking only to duty, overcomes, by sheer persistence, the difficulties it ignores. Sorrow might bend, but could not break her spirit. Like certain flowers which, tread them down as you will, lift their fair heads directly the crushing footstep has passed on, it rose, for all its meekness, the more invincible, because of its misfortunes. Satisfied that Sarchedon was fairly gone, she set herself the one single task of recovering him. Was he sold into captivity? He must be

bought back. Was he lost? He must be found. That should now be her sole object in life; and no sooner did she feel strong enough to stand upright than she began her work without wasting another moment in consideration or delay. Seeking the chief of the Anakim, whom she found without the encampment leading his mare to water, she placed herself in his path, standing erect and motionless till he approached. Then she rent her garment to the hem, and, lifting a handful of sand, poured it over her head.

"The servant of my lord is in sore distress and perplexity," said she: "to whom should she come for help, but to him of whose bread and salt she has eaten within the shadow of his tents?"

The mare was rubbing her head caressingly against his breast; he pushed her away, extending both arms in token of sincerity, and replied, "All that I have, my life, and the lives of my tribe, herds and horses, bows and spears, are at the disposal of my guest."

"My lord speaks well," answered Ishtar. "But words are vain. Like the flight of a bird through the air, they leave no track. It is the steed and the camel that stamp their mark on the sand."

"The tongues of the Anakim are small and feeble," said he, "their arms long and weighty. Desire of me what you will. It is a gift, before it is asked."

"What have you done with the Assyrian?" she murmured eagerly. "How fares he? Whither is he gone? You will not deceive me!"

"You are my guest," returned the chief, "and I cannot deceive you. The Assyrian is sold into captivity; ere now he has journeyed many a furlong over the plain towards the city of the Great King."

"Is he, then, bound for Babylon?" she asked, with something of hope rising in her eyes.

"I know not, of a surety," was his answer. "Yet I think these northern traders, possessing so goodly a captive, would hardly pass within a few days' journey of the great city, and fail to visit its market. They will treat him well, and if he finds friends to redeem him, he may soon be free. No doubt in Babylon he will sell for nearly a talent of gold, and we let him go at a hundred shekels of silver! Half the price of a camel! Truly there is injustice in the desert as in the city!"

This reflection was unheard by Ishtar, being indeed but the echo of the chief's own thoughts, and spoken aside, as it were, into the ear of his mare. There seemed a vague hope,

then, of seeing Sarchedon once again. The girl seized her protector's hand, and, stooping but a little, pressed it against her forehead.

"You will take me under safe conduct to the gates of Babylon?" said she.

He pondered, looking very grave.

"Will you not abide with us in our tents?" he asked. "Will you be cooped up in the walls of a city, when you might roam over the desert free as the wild ass on the plain? Take thought, damsel, once more, as a man fits a new bowstring when his arrow has missed its aim."

"Had I a quiverful," she replied, "I can see but one mark for them all!"

"You are my guest," said he stoutly; "and go where you will, it is my duty to speed you safely on your way. You shall ride this my own mare, the most precious of my possessions, and Lotus-flower, swift, easy, gentle, will bear you like flowing water. But I must leave you, damsel, under cover of night, in the vineyards that fringe the great city. If, for every horseman who leaps to the saddle when I shake my spear, I could muster a score, then should you enter Babylon through a breach of fifty cubits in the wall. But a wolf or a jackal would meet with more mercy than a child of Anak from the Assyrians when they set upon him, a hundred to one! I have spoken."

Their journey was begun accordingly. Ishtar, mounted on the chief's favourite mare, led by its owner, and guarded by a score of the stalwart sons of Anak, journeyed in security and comfort through the wilderness, until they reached its confines, and entered a territory over which Ninus, and more especially Semiramis, had thrown the protection of their severe and pitiless laws. Here they lay hidden by day, advancing swiftly and silently under cover of night; and Ishtar could not withhold her admiration from the extraordinary skill and sagacity shown by these professional spoilers in concealing their encampment on their march. On such expeditions as the present, they were careful to ride their mares; for these animals, docile and gentle, either loose or picketed, never disclosed their presence by those paroxysms of neighing and screaming to which their less tractable brothers were exceedingly prone.

At length, soon after dawn, Ishtar found herself alone with the chief at an easy distance from the great city. Taking the ass of a poor peasant, who dared not even protest against the spoliation, he had dismounted his guest

from the high-bred mare, and placed her on the humbler animal's back. The troop had been left many a league in the desert. Their leader, at the utmost personal risk, was within a short ride of Babylon. It was time to depart, and thus he bade his charge farewell—

"May thy corn never fail nor thy well run dry! May thy vines yield a hundredfold, and men-children play round thy feet! Thou camest into my tent like the breeze from the mountain. Though the breeze passeth on, the tent is glad because of the coolness it hath left. The desert is boundless, and we scour it far and wide. Behold! Where rides a son of Anak, there hast thou a brother. I have spoken."

He swung himself on the mare from which he had lately dismounted, caught Lotus-flower by the bridle, and sped away like the wind. She watched the gigantic form till it disappeared amongst the dust raised by those two fleet animals, of which toil and privation seemed in no way to diminish the mettle or speed; then she looked towards Great Babylon, towering in state, with her glittering pinnacles, her flashing gates, her frowning, forbidding walls, and felt that she had lost a friend.

CHAPTER XXXIV

FORLORN

SHE had lost a friend, and where was there another left? Her father slain, her home despoiled, the man she loved sold into slavery and carried she knew not where: could human lot be more lonely, more hopeless? Yet she never lost heart. Plodding on in lowly guise, riding that humble animal there was yet dominant in her tender frame a hopeful courage, such as does not always animate the warrior in his chariot, a spirit of self-reliance and self-devotion that would have ennobled a sceptred monarch on his throne.

Reaching the well-remembered spot where she used to watch for the return of Arbaces, where she had first met Sarchedon riding home with tidings from the Great King, it was no wonder that she saw the Well of Palms through a mist of tears. Nevertheless she dashed them hastily from her eyes, and summoned all her energies, when she became aware of a troop of horsemen moving rapidly on her track. To be discovered by these, she knew too well, would entail the risk of insult, perhaps injury, and the certainty of delay. While they were yet afar off, she leaped from the ass, and, taking advantage of her familiarity with the locality, concealed herself behind a broken wall that skirted the fountain, while the animal jogged leisurely home, to the relief and comfort of its disconsolate owner.

So near the great city, a solitary wayfarer was an object of little interest. She soon perceived she had escaped observation by the movements of the party, who galloped on towards Babylon without diverging to visit her hiding-place. She determined, however, to remain concealed yet a while longer, and had no cause to regret her caution, when a single horseman, detaching himself from the rest, approached the marble basin of the Well of Palms, as if to water his good white steed, ere he passed on. Half a bow-shot off, she recognised the animal with a start of fear, suspense, surprise,

sweetened by a thrill of love. She could not be deceived: it was Merodach! That spotless frame, those glancing limbs, that gallant bearing, could belong to no other animal in the land of Shinar; and where Merodach bent to the rein, it seemed cruelly hard Sarchedon's should not be the hand to guide. Watching with fond and eager eyes, she turned sick and faint, while she crouched down, like some poor hunted fawn, into her shelter; for on its back, soothing the good horse with many a gentle word and tender caress, sat the form of him whom most she feared and hated in the bounds of earth. Yes; the beautiful face she seemed yet to behold lulled on her own breast, in flushed and drunken sleep, was surely there, within a few paces, gazing dreamily into the distance; while Merodach, scarcely wetting his dark muzzle in the water, pawed and snorted in restless impatience to rejoin the companions he had left.

What was Ninyas doing here? Had the prince pursued her from Ascalon? was he on her track, and searching for her even now? could she escape him, neither in the city nor the plain? All these thoughts whirled through her brain, while she lay still as death, scarcely daring to breathe, peering at her enemy through a crevice of the crumbling wall with pale face and wild dilated eyes. The horseman seemed moody and abstracted—strangely lavish of caresses for his steed, strangely indifferent to the heat of the sun, the ripple of the fountain, everything but his own engrossing thoughts. Without dismounting, he sat wrapped in meditation for a space of time that appeared interminable to the watcher, ere he woke up, as it were, with a start, and, curbing his beast's impatience, rode away at a walk to enter the city by a different gate from that which the party he had left were about to pass through.

Emerging from her shelter, though not until the white horse and his rider had disappeared in the distance, Ishtar felt sadly perplexed. To abide by her present hiding-place would be imprudent in the highest degree, for the Well of Palms was the resort of every traveller who approached Babylon on its southern side. If she retraced her steps, and fled once more into the wilderness, she must perish from thirst and fatigue; for to be afoot in the desert without a camel was to be adrift on the sea without a boat; and she had even abandoned the honest plodding beast that brought her thus far after she left her gigantic protector at sunrise. She almost wished now she had remained in their tents with the Anakim, intrusting to those tameless denizens of the

waste her own safety and the task of eventually recovering her lover. She saw no other course left but to trudge wearily on, and pass, if possible, unnoticed through the gate of Babylon, there to seek high and low some real friend, who, for her father's sake, would give her bread to eat, a roof to cover her, and aid in the one object of her life. Wrapping her veil closely round her, counterfeiting as well as she could the gait and bearing of a woman advanced in years and of humble grade, Ishtar toiled slowly forward, carrying indeed a sorely laden heart into that glittering capital of splendour, luxury, and sin.

The troop that had so disquieted this forlorn and friendless fugitive trampled bravely on, raising clouds of dust, through which flashed the magnificence of their arms and apparel, as a beautiful face sparkles and blushes through its tawny veil. Without waiting for the detached horseman, they hastened towards the city, galloping, it seemed, from sheer exuberance of spirits rather than from any actual necessity for speed. The principal figure in the group, to whom the others turned obsequiously for guidance, was Assarac; and the eunuch's bearing, as he managed his steed with the graceful ease of an Assyrian born, was dignified and commanding in the extreme. By his side rode Beladon, laughing, talking, gesticulating, proud to show his countrymen that a priest of Baal could back a horse and bend a bow with the best of them—that if his sacred character debarred him from seeking fame in the war-chariot, he was yet a true child of Ashur for skill and daring in the chase. His eye gleamed, his cheek glowed; there were stains of blood on his linen garments; and from his horse's chest dangled the muzzle and fangs of a full-grown lion, that had fallen since sunrise to his bow. He was never weary of detailing this achievement, dwelling in boundless satisfaction on his own success and the formidable size of his prey. Assarac listened, with his usual imperturbable smile.

"I called on Baal," said Beladon, "and urged my good horse to his speed; for already the lion was scarce the cast of a javelin from the reeds, and had he reached his thicket, I must have gone in and finished him on foot. By the belt of Nimrod, I can tell you it was no comely face he showed me when I came up with him. His eyes glared like the carbuncles on the palace gate, and he bared all these fangs that hang here at my horse's breast, as who should say, Behold! a score of proven warriors, and every one an enemy! I drew my bow thus—to my very ear—and as he rose on his

hind-legs, I pierced him straight and true right through his open mouth, then turned my hand and galloped off across the plain, lest he should rise up ere life was extinct, and tear my good horse limb from limb in his death-pang."

"So the spearmen gathered round and slew him," observed Assarac.

"The spearmen gathered round and slew him," repeated the other, "after they found him disabled by the might of this right arm. When I turned back and got down to measure his carcass, there was my shaft driven through the roof of his mouth, cleaving his very skull."

"Was there not an arrow in his body when he fell?" asked the eunuch.

Beladon coloured and looked vexed.

"The king had, indeed, loosed a shaft at the beast when first we roused him," said he. "Doubtless, the royal hand never misses its mark."

"Had you come between Ninus and his prey in the olden time," observed the other, "not all the host of heaven could have turned aside his wrath. He would have impaled you before set of sun."

"He loved the chase dearly," answered Beladon, "as did the Great Queen, and Ninyas too, till lately. What has come over him now? He leaps to the saddle at dawn—hasty, eager, excited, as though every beast of chase between the rivers must be swept away forthwith, slaying and sparing not—then, after one fierce dash at the wild-bull, one savage thrust at the lion, leaves his followers, as he left us even now, to ride slowly home, sad, moody, and alone. Always on the same steed too. It seems as though he cared for nothing under heaven but the white horse with the wild eyes."

"'Tis a good beast," answered the other, scrutinising the face of his follower, "and worthy to bear the person of a king."

"A good beast indeed," said Beladon simply, "and belonged once to as good a warrior as ever lifted spear or emptied wine-cup. It seems but yesterday that Sarchedon brought back the Great King's signet, and made his night's lodging with us in the temple of our god. What has become of him now? I would we knew!"

"I would we knew!" repeated Assarac in a careless tone, as if he only echoed the other's sentiments, not as if he would have given wealth untold, deemed no waste of blood or treasure too lavish, for the information.

Reining their horses to a walk, the gaudy troop had

already passed through one of her gates, and entered the crowded streets of Babylon. Thinking their king was amongst the party, his people gathered round in considerable numbers, and appeared disappointed to miss the beautiful face and form they so seldom looked on now. It was a common remark amongst all classes, that the wild, free-living, free-spoken young prince had become strangely solemn and reserved since his accession to the throne. There was far less revelry in the palace than in the days of stern old Ninus. His son seldom rode abroad through the streets or showed himself to his people. The shadow of the priests of Baal seemed over the monarch, and it was known that Assarac had great influence in the royal counsels. As is usual in such cases, the favourite came in for a larger share of obloquy than his lord. Nevertheless, there is always enough popularity about a gay cavalcade to ensure its welcome in a pleasure-loving city like Babylon. Assarac could not but observe that, although there were dark frowns and angry glances in the outskirts of the crowd, the nearer spectators shouted their welcome cordially enough, pressing in to kiss the trappings of his horse, the hem of his garment, with all the transitory enthusiasm of their impressionable nature.

"'Tis an easy people to rule!" whispered Beladon in the ear of his superior. "Believers in Baal, and a thousand gods besides; mark the reverence they pay your sacred character. Surely the sons of Ashur love the linen vestment of the priest."

"Were not their shouts yet louder, their welcome kinder, to the scarlet and steel of the Great King's horsemen, when he marched in from Egypt?" returned Assarac. "Trust me, Beladon, they bend lowest when they carry the heaviest load. They love deepest where most they have to fear."

"And they fear Baal," said the other.

"Only because they know not Nisroch," replied Assarac. "God or man can be great for this false fickle nation only until there cometh a greater than he. Do they not offer homage willingly to Abitur of the Mountains? And why? Because they dread his power, not knowing its nature nor its extent. Their ruler should indeed be a god in all but benevolence. He must have no natural sympathies, no human weaknesses, no remorse, no pity, and, above all, no fear."

"There is but one man in the land of Shinar who is above and without these softer failings of his kind. May I sit on his right hand henceforward, as to-day!" was Beladon's insidious reply.

Though half despising the flattery of his follower, Assarac smiled. Yet it did not escape the other's observation, ever on the alert, that in the eunuch's smile lurked an expression of weariness and sorrow almost amounting to pain.

"The king has faithful followers," said he, "and wise counsellors—may he live for ever!"

The crowd hemmed them in very close; his last sentence, though uttered in a low voice, was caught up and repeated by a thousand tongues. Through the noise and confusion that prevailed, only Assarac could hear the whisper of his subordinate—

"Baal is great. What are kings and princes compared to the mighty Assyrian god? Let Baal rule alone in Babylon and through all the land of Shinar; while Assarac, the interpreter of his will to the people, twines the sacred lotus round the royal sceptre, he needs but stretch out his hand to take."

"As the serpent of Ashtaroth twines round a man's heart!" answered the other. And Beladon, looking in his face, marvelled to see it drawn and white, as of one who strives with an agony of mortal pain.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE LION'S CUB

IT was but according to an established principle of nature and general law of race, that the descendants of Nimrod should entertain a keen predilection for the chase. In this particular Ninyas, notwithstanding habits of luxury and effeminacy at home, formed no exception to the princes of his line. He was never so happy as when urging a good horse to speed after the scudding ostrich, loosing a grim leopard from its leash to spring on the fleet antelope, tracking with fierce and heavy hounds the footprints of some lordly lion on the desert sand, or watching with eager eyes his long-winged falcons wheeling and stooping in the desert sky. Skilled in bodily exercises, sitting his horse with the graceful ease of constant practice, flushed, panting, joyous, he rode to and fro, beautiful as a woman and radiant as a god.

After that night of revelry, on which he so lowered the pride of Rekamat, to be in turn foiled by Ishtar, it was not strange that this wayward prince should wake from a feverish sleep in the very worst of humours; but having relieved his irritated feelings by condemning the captain of the gate to a painful death, and settled himself in the saddle for a long day's pleasure on the plain, he felt sufficiently comforted to enter with considerable zest into the amusement of the hour. While his horse was fresh, he had succeeded in approaching within bow-shot of some wild asses to wound one of the herd wantonly and uselessly, with an arrow from his own royal quiver. He had fairly ridden down and secured an ostrich of unusual plumage, breaking the bird's long legs by a blow from the club, which he flung while galloping at speed with marvellous dexterity. His leopard had not failed to strike an antelope at the first pounce; his hawks never once missed their quarry, nor delayed returning obedient to the lure; moreover, he had brought an old male lion to bay, and, riding in on him, wounded the monster so severely with his spear, that although it had crawled for refuge into certain

"It had crawled for refuge into certain inaccessible rocks."

inaccessible rocks, it must have died before night; and as none of his servants had come up to help him, the glory was exclusively his own. Accordingly, when he paced back into Ascalon at sundown, weary and dishevelled, yet happy and triumphant, he felt at peace with mankind; revenge seemed hateful, anger impossible, and all he thirsted for was a cup of wine.

Dismounting within the gate of the fortress, it was served as his foot touched the ground. Then he bethought him of the fugitive from Egypt, to whom he had not yet granted audience, and desired that this visitor should be brought into his presence forthwith. Sethos, in his dark and cheerless apartment, scooped out of the very rock on which the fortress stood, received such a summons with considerable dismay. The care taken to secure him, the dreary nature of his lodging, the coarse food brought by his only visitor, a spearman, belted with bow and quiver, grim, silent, and armed to the teeth, denoted that his offence, whatever it might be, was considered of exceeding gravity, and that in all likelihood his imprisonment would soon be terminated by death. Bold and joyous as was his nature, the cup-bearer followed his conductor with a sad brow and a heavy heart. He knew the prince's character well, and a peal of laughter from his lord, while he bent low at the royal feet, served by no means to allay his fears.

"So I have kept him in ward from sunrise to sunset," exclaimed Ninyas, shaking his sides and wiping his eyes, in the exuberance of his mirth, "little guessing who he was! The Great King's cup-bearer, the curled and scented ornament of all the Assyrian host, the daintiest flower in the whole of dainty Babylon, for whom the royal banquet was but a coarse meal of broken meat—the royal court, blazing with a thousand torches, but a dim and dismal den. And I ordered him bitter water and bread of affliction; shut him up in a stone cell without a breath of air or a gleam of light! By the beard of Ashur I shall never recover it. O Sethos, Sethos! had I known this morning it was you, I could not have sat my horse for laughing all day. And think what a spoil we should have lost! Five antelopes, man; an ostrich as tall as my spear; scores of all the birds of heaven; and a lion, though we brought him not in, so tawny that he seemed almost black, old, and fierce, like Nimrod himself, big as a wild bull, and with fangs more than a span long. By the quiver of Merodach, I have not taken such a prey since we hunted that pleasant time in the northern mountains, before the Egyptian campaign!"

Ninyas seemed in high good-humour. Sethos, raising his eyes to look in the prince's joyous face, knew that the bitterness of death was past.

"His servant has received many good gifts from my lord," was the conventional reply. "Shall he not accept evil without complaint? There can be no injustice between a master and his slave."

"But how come you here?" asked Ninyas, ignoring, from force of habit, the accustomed formalities of the other. "They tell me you rode in with half a score of bowmen, pursued by the hosts of Egypt—chariots and horsemen, banner, bow, and spear. I would have loosed a shaft or two amongst them nevertheless, had they been a hundred to one."

"My lord speaks well," answered Sethos proudly. "His servant slew their leader with his own hand ere he turned rein, and fled to seek shelter with my lord!"

"I would I had been at your back!" exclaimed the prince, kindling. "I grew weary unto death of their country, I own, when we rode there under the banner of Ashur, and I never wished to set eyes on one of their tawny faces or their supple backs again. But to have them brought here at bow-shot distance, without any trouble, like a troop of wild asses or a herd of deer! Ah, Sethos, you were always a favourite of the gods—Baal, Nisroch, Merodach, and above all, Ashtaroth, Queen of Light!"

"My lord gives praise to his servant out of his own bounty," answered the other. "Hath Ninyas ever yet been known to come down from saddle or war-chariot without taking the first spoil? And as for Ashtaroth—surely, fairer game than feeds in field or forest falls to him, even before he lifts his bow."

The prince loved flattery dearly, though he had wit to despise the flatterer. He smiled well pleased.

"I cannot blame the gods," said he; "they have served me better than ever I served them. Do you remember the old lion we slew in the mountains ten days' march from Nineveh, when you drove my chariot up to the axles through the marsh? That was a prey worth the taking of a king. How he grinned and roared, and fought, with my javelin through his shoulder, and my arrow in his neck! Had he not torn at the chariot-wheel with claws and fangs, in blind senseless rage, we had hardly brought his dark skin home to make a foot-cloth for the Great Queen. Believe me, man, the beast I slew to-day might have been whelped in the same litter—as old, as savage, flecked in the jaws with grey, leaner perhaps, and a

thought longer—say a span—from muzzle to tail. I am no boaster, Sethos; but surely old Nimrod himself can scarce have won nobler triumphs over the fiercest beasts of chase than mine!"

"My lord hath spoken," answered Sethos. "Is he not unrivalled in war, in the chase, in love?"

The last word seemed to touch some painful chord, rouse some bitter memory in his listener. The prince's handsome face reddened, and then turned pale. When he spoke again, it was the cup-bearer's turn to feel discomposed; for the voice of Ninyas sounded cold and hard, his manner had become stern and almost severe. The lion's cub so far resembled his fierce old father, that his mood would change on occasion at a moment's notice from joyous good-humour and hilarity to a paroxysm of wrath, all the more dangerous that it was so sudden and unexpected. With Ninus, however, such an access of passion betrayed itself in uncontrolled violence of language and gesture; while his son, on the contrary, concealed his feelings under a smooth brow and calm demeanour, far more implacable than the savage outbreak of his sire. The one would order an offender to be taken out and strangled on the spot, but forgive him perhaps before the fatal covering had been drawn round his head. The other spoke softly, nodded courteously, passed sentence of death in a whisper, and remitted it for no consideration of justice or mercy whatsoever. But the prince loved pleasure even more than cruelty, and was therefore popular enough with the multitude, who were willing to give his beautiful face and graceful form credit for every royal virtue; believing no evil of one who rode abroad so gallantly in such shining raiment, sat so long at the feast among brave men and beautiful women, drank so deep, laughed so loud, and looked so fair, garland on head and wine-cup in hand.

"You have not yet accounted for your presence in Ascalon," said he coldly.

And Sethos, knowing well that he must trim his sails according as the wind blew, answered with the gravity of some high official making a report—

"In order to fulfil the mission of my lord, I was compelled to journey swiftly, tarrying nowhere by the way. Therefore were our horses somewhat faint and wearied, or we had laughed to scorn the speed of the Egyptian, flinging sand like the wild ass in their faces who pursue."

"You should have halted and fought it out," observed Ninyas.

"The embassy of my lord spoke indeed of defiance," replied Sethos; "but his servant was accompanied by scarce a score of horsemen. The hosts of Egypt swarmed like locusts in a south wind. Had the city of refuge stood but one furlong farther off, our bones had lain bleaching in the desert, or we had been again brought into the terrible presence of Pharaoh ere now."

"Then you have seen Pharaoh?" interrupted Ninyas. "What is he like?"

The cup-bearer looked surprised.

"I have indeed stood before him," he answered, "and spoken with Pharaoh face to face. His throne is of beaten gold, studded with jewels; his garments shine and glisten so that he seems clad in light; but the man himself is of low stature and puny frame, lean, sallow, undignified. It is only the line of Ashur who are princes in bearing as in blood."

"The princes of Ashur go out to war with their hosts," responded Ninyas, accepting the compliment greedily enough. "Pharaoh lay soft in his palace beyond the river many a night while I was watching with bow and spear."

"Pharaoh lives for ever," said the other. "So proclaim his captains and officials from rise to set of sun. Perhaps it is that he cares not to front death in battle or the chase. Nevertheless, he entertained me with all the honour due to him who carried the message of my lord the king."

"And what message had my lord the king for one with whom he might have made his own terms at his very gate?" asked the prince.

Once more the puzzled look crossed his face, while Sethos pondered ere he replied. The path he trod seemed very dangerous; he must look well to his balance at every step. Taking courage, he answered frankly, yet with a certain caution—

"What am I, that I should stand in the light of the king's countenance? The reed withers in the furnace and is consumed, the bar of iron doth but bend and obey. On such a matter it was not fitting that the lowest of his servants should speak with the king face to face. I received my instructions from him who stood on the king's right hand. Shall I repeat them to my lord?"

Ninyas watched him keenly.

"Why not?" he asked.

"I was commanded to make all speed through the desert, until I came into the presence of Pharaoh himself," said the cup-bearer; "to speak out boldly, as befitted him who repre-

sented the glory of Nimrod; to demand the body of a son of Ashur, lying captive in the land of Egypt; and if aught but good had befallen him, to warn Pharaoh that Assyria would come down with her chariots and horsemen to take a life for every hair of Sarchedon's head."

The prince started as if he was stung.

"Sarchedon!" he exclaimed. "Was it even so? And you brought him back with you to Ascalon?"

"It seemed but my duty," answered Sethos, "to shelter in a city of refuge one on whose head the king set so high a price, rather than suffer him to fall a second time into the hand of the false Egyptian."

Ninyas seemed much disturbed, betraying his vexation, as the other could not but perceive, in the unnatural composure of his demeanour.

"And these instructions?" said he, after a pause. "They must have been given by one in authority, standing at the right hand of my lord the king."

"They were given by Assarac, high-priest of Baal," answered the cup-bearer. "Surely my lord is but proving his servant with empty words. What am I, that I should seek to show aught but the truth in the sight of my lord?"

"Assarac, high-priest of Baal!" repeated Ninyas. "And at the right hand of the Great King! Beware, my friend; beware! There is yet a morsel of bread and a cruse of water in that dungeon where you passed the day. When a son of Ashur speaks to his lord with a lie in his mouth, surely his face is already covered, and his blood lies on his own head."

Hurt, alarmed, and in the utmost perplexity, the tears rising to his eyes, Sethos could but answer in a broken voice—

"The Great King is gone to the gods! If my lord should slay his servant, he can only speak of that which he hath seen and knows."

In spite of all his self-control, Ninyas turned deadly pale, rocking and tottering where he stood, like a man stricken sore in fight. Then he called for another cup of wine, and turning to Sethos, with a smile said only—

"Leave me now; I am wearied, and the sun smote fierce to-day on the desert sand. See that they water not my horse till he is cool; and, Sethos, let not man nor woman come near me till I clap my hands."

With these words Ninyas retired to his chamber, and was seen no more, leaving the cup-bearer at his wits' end with astonishment, a state which was shared more or less by all the household; for was not the banquet spread, the hall

lighted, the wine poured out, yet the prince absent? Such an event had never yet come to pass in the memory of his servants; and Rekamat, who hoped to-night she would regain some of the footing she had lost in his favour, was loud in protestations of astonishment and vexation. She was yet more dismayed, however, on the morrow to learn that a troop of horsemen had passed out of the gate at sunrise, and disappeared in the desert towards the north; the watchman further reporting, that in their centre, on the prince's favourite steed, rode a woman closely veiled. Rekamat bit her lip in sore vexation, to keep back the tears of spite and shame that rose brimming to her eyes.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE POWER OF THE DOG

TOWARDS sunset, Ishtar wandered into Babylon anxious, forlorn, and desolate, yet carefully nursing in her breast that spark of true courage she inherited from a line of warriors. In plain attire, travel-worn and dejected, she passed on among a crowd of wayfarers, heeded by none. Desirous of escaping observation, she yet could not help reflecting bitterly how everything about her was changed, herself perhaps most of all.

It seemed but yesterday that the daughter of Arbaces moved abroad attended by a retinue of servants, escorted by a troop of horsemen. Even when most she affected privacy, she could not stir without women, camels, foot-cloths, fan-bearers, all the encumbrances of rank. Eager eyes were fain to pierce her veil, that they might gaze on her beauty; kind voices wafted after her their welcome or good wishes, because of her own graces and her father's fame. She was flattered, admired—above all, loved. And now she must shrink beneath the wall, to avoid the rude camel-driver and his ungainly charge. The water-carrier, tottering under his jars, gruffly bade her stand aside to let him pass; and the only courtesy she experienced amongst that hurrying, shifting throng was from a curled and bearded bowman, who would fain have lifted her veil as the price of his protection, and whose good offices she repulsed with a scornful energy that put him to flight in considerable dismay.

She wept a little after this effort, and hurried on faster to the shelter of what had once been her home.

In the days of mourning that succeeded his death, or, as his subjects were taught to believe, the enthronement amongst the stars of the Great King, a strange repressive power had made itself felt amongst all classes in the city of Babylon. An unseen hand, cold, weighty, and irresistible, seemed laid upon the whole people, forbidding any demonstration of sympathy and indeed all expression of feeling whatever, public or private. The king's host, as it was still termed, had been

recalled within the walls, and amalgamated cordially enough with their comrades of that army which was avowedly in the interests of the queen; but the citizens gained little from such an alliance, save more mouths to feed, more prejudices to consult, and it might almost be said more masters to serve. The priests of Baal too, with whom, in the reign of Ninus, his men of war had been covertly at variance, seemed now on terms of the closest brotherhood with all who handled bow and spear. Such a fusion of two non-productive classes boded little good to those whose industry supported both; and the thoughtless Babylonian, usually so light-hearted, found himself saddened and depressed when he had fondly expected to eat, drink, and be merry, under the easy rule of a lord who preferred feast to fray, bubble of wine-cup to clash of sword and spear. From a change of rulers Babylon had expected a change of those principles which constitute government itself. Ninus, though firm and impartial, was severe, and reined her with a strong hand; she had therefore always looked forward to the day when his son should sway the sceptre, as a time of ease and luxury, with license for every man to think and speak and act as seemed good in his own eyes. But Ninus went to the stars, Ninyas reigned in his stead; and the citizens wondered, with blank faces, why bread was dear and water scarce, the priest covetous, the warrior oppressive, and the royal yoke harder than ever to be borne.

Under such circumstances none thought it worth while to bestir himself for the bettering of his own position, or the assistance of his neighbour. If a well was choked, he cared not to clear it: if a wall fell down, he let it lie. There was a shadow over the city, and its inhabitants already regretted the wise foresight and judicious government of the Great Queen.

Ishtar felt very weary before she reached the portals of her father's house, very sad and friendless when she crossed its threshold and looked round on the precincts of her home. The sun was down, but a clear cold moon poured its beams over the scene of desolation and decay. It was obvious that the palace must have been abandoned on the night of its attack, and that no friend or servant of Arbaces had revisited it since. The assailants, having another object than plunder, carried away from his dwelling only that one of his possessions the chief captain most dearly valued, which they took with them to Ascalon. But an unguarded house could scarce remain unspoiled for a single night in such a city as Babylon. And Ishtar found her father's dwelling rifled and sacked from

roof-tree to door-stone completely, as though an enemy had taken it by storm. In the courtyard remnants of shawls, silks, precious arms, costly flagons, strewed the inlaid pavement, dinted and defaced by marks of struggling feet; but the shreds were frayed and torn, stained with wine or stiff with blood, the weapons bent or broken; the flagons lay crushed and battered where they had been emptied and dashed down. Pushing aside some rent hangings at the entrance of the court, night-hawks shrieked and night-owls hooted, while a bat, flying out, struck cold and clammy against Ishtar's cheek. Her flesh crept with horror; but that sorrow mastered fear, she must have cried aloud for help.

The moon shone brighter as it mounted in the sky. Patches of dried blood stained courts and passages, a splintered javelin and a naked sword lay at her feet—fragments of alabaster and gilding broken from the sculptures on the walls strewed the floor; but whatever loss the assailants might have sustained, it seemed that they had borne away their wounded and their dead. As yet she was spared the ghastly presence of a corpse.

Cold and faint, she leaned against the wall to take breath. It had come to this. Amongst all that shattered splendour in those very halls where her father feasted scores of warriors, every one a captain of ten thousand, there was now neither bread to eat nor wine to drink — no, nor the means of purchasing so much as a draught of fair water; though so short a while ago the palace of Arbaces had been stored with royal gifts and costly merchandise, meat and drink, gold, precious stones, and spoil of war. If she could but find even an embroidered baldrick, a jewelled dagger, whole and uninjured, something she might carry into the market, and sell for as many shekels of silver as would put food into her mouth, and enable her to continue those efforts for the delivery of Sarchedon, which should never cease but with her life!

Resolving to search the palace through, she pushed on, traversing the court she had lately entered, and so reached the well-known stairs leading to the women's apartment, that heretofore she had so often climbed dreamily thinking of her lover, or run down blithely with a smiling welcome for her sire. Here were indeed traces of deadly strife. Embroidered curtains, torn and disordered, dangled from the wall; defaced sculptures and shattered slabs encumbered the pavement; a slender column of bronze, supporting a brazier, was bent and

twisted to its pedestal; a broken bow lay across a torch long since extinguished on the floor. The lower part of the hall was black in shadow, while a flood of moonlight bathed roof and rafters, painted woodwork, gilded pinnacle, all the elaborate ornament and finish which had been above the level of the conflict.

As her foot touched the first step, two lurid eyes glared on her through the darkness, and a long lean object glided swiftly by, brushing her garments as it passed. It was the wild-dog disturbed from his loathsome meal. She had no fear now; only a thrill of intense suffering, with a fierce hideous desire for revenge. Wreathing her white arms above her head, she flung herself down by something, that an instinct of love, stronger than the very horror of the situation, told her must be the remains of her father. A cloven head-piece had rolled from the smooth and grinning skull. His fleshless fingers still closed round the handle of a sword. He lay where he fell, his face to heaven, grim, unyielding, defiant even in death; but the wild-dogs had stripped him to the bone, and it was a bare bleached skeleton against which Ishtar laid her pale and shuddering cheek.

There rose through roof and rafters, curdling her very blood, a shrill and piercing shriek. She never knew it was the wail of agony wrung from her by her own despair. Alas for the brave spirit passed away, the loyal heart, cold and still, kind and true! He had been struck down in her defence; had been willing, eager, to purchase with drops of life-blood the brief moments that might have aided her to escape; his last blow struck on her behalf, his last breath drawn for the child who had sat on his knees and lain in his bosom. The noblest warrior that ever drew bow in the service of Ninus, fit leader of the brave who were arrayed under the banner of Ashur at his behest. She was proud of him even then.

As the moonbeams crept across the pavement where it lay, they were so far merciful, that they revealed to her the ghastly sight by imperceptible degrees. She seemed to gather strength from him whose blood ran in her veins, stretched out in that white distorted heap, scarce retaining a semblance of human form. She thought of him in the majesty of his strength, the pride and beauty of his manhood, recalling the broad hand that used to rest so lovingly on her head, the noble brow that never wore a frown for her; and the weight seemed lifted from her brain, the iron probe taken out of her heart, while sobs convulsed her bosom, and

scalding tears rushed to her eyes. She became human again. She was a woman now, and she wept.

It was a weary watch. The long night through she never left his skeleton, never changed her position, nor ceased her silent mourning, nor moved a limb, but to drive away the wild-dogs that glided in and out the entrance of the court, drawing near with eager whine and wistful eyes while she was still, scouring off in vexed dismay when she stirred, to return again, and yet again, till dawn. Though grief like hers may for a time dominate the requirements of the body, these assert themselves at last. With the return of day Ishtar felt conscious of hunger and weakness, the one threatening to overpower her if the cravings of the other were not speedily satisfied. She knew she must exert herself at once, lest she too should sink down, and die by him whose bones lay bleaching beside her there. Would it not be better so? What had she to do with life now? There was but one consideration to rouse her from the apathy of despair. The last obsequies must be paid to the remains of her father; and who would ensure for him that final mark of respect if she was gone? She would live at least till this was accomplished; and therefore must she go out into the city, and stand unveiled in square and street till she could find a friend. Surely amongst all those men of war who went forth to battle at his word might pass one who would recognise his daughter, and afford the only tribute of respect left to the memory of Arbaces!

From the resolution to make her effort grew strength to attempt it. With exertion came renewed vitality, and with vitality a spark of hope. Yes, even through those depths of gloom and misery glimmered faint reflective rays of that which was not quite impossible; as the light of heaven, though blurred and dim, reaches one who is sinking in the green bewildering sea. Then she rose up, tore a strip of curtain from the portal, and lifting the skeleton with tender reverent care, disposed it in a seemly attitude under that scanty covering, so as to baffle wild-dog and vulture till her return.

In raising her father's remains she found under them a baldrick in which his sword had hung, embroidered by her own hands. Even this had been gnawed and partly eaten away; but it was fastened with a jewelled clasp, pressed down beneath the broad shoulder-blade of the dead warrior, and had escaped alike the eyes of cupidity and the fangs of hunger. It was a treasure to her now. Drawing it hastily

out, she concealed it in her bosom, kissing the precious relic once with eager, passionate lips, because she must part from it so soon. Then she disposed his strange shroud about the remains of Arbaces, looked high and low, to earth and heaven, with wild imploring eyes, seeking aid, but finding none, and so walked out alone into the world from her home.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE WINGS OF A DOVE

N hour after sunrise, Babylon the Great was up and dressed like any other restless lady, wakeful and astir, warm with life and beauty, rich in gaudy colours, bright with gold and gems. Trumpets that mustered warriors by thousands were pealing from her walls. Priests of Baal and prophets of the grove were chanting their idolatrous hymns, to ring of harp or sound of timbrel, through a score of stately temples, a hundred squares, terraces, and open places in the city. Oxen were lowing, sheep bleating, as they stood in droves herded together for sacrifice. Peasants from without were toiling under their market-produce; merchants of Tyre and of the south were guiding their camels, laden with bales of costly goods for the mart of nations; a hundred streams of labour, luxury, and traffic converged to this common centre; and through all her gates the wealth of a hundred countries was flowing in to enrich the mistress of the world. She accepted their tribute like a queen lavish of smiles and honours, repaying real substantial benefits with bright glitter of ornament, with show of tinsel and gilding, with a false welcome and a cold farewell. Her visitors took their leave, the better for her notice, by an acquired taste for deteriorating luxuries, an increased discontent with the manly simplicity of their homes. They thronged in and out nevertheless, crowding especially to one quarter of the city, on the banks of the broad river, at an equal distance from the two royal palaces, where it was customary to hold a market for all kind of wares and provisions, where a man might purchase, according to his needs, a barley loaf or a dress of honour, a rope of onions or a string of pearls.

Here prevailed that stir, turmoil, and confusion of tongues which must necessarily accompany such gatherings of different tribes and professions, especially under a southern sky. The plain-spoken countryman discoursed volubly on the luxuriant growth of garden-stuff that overflowed his baskets; the keener-witted citizen cheapened and chaffered, sparing neither laughter nor sarcasm, nor shrill and deafening abuse; dark-skinned Ethiopians grinned, nodded, clapped their hands, and rubbed their woolly heads in mingled amazement and delight; haughty warriors stalked in and out the stalls of the various traders with martial strides and offensive demeanour, taking at their own price such things as they required, or, on occasion, omitting the ceremony of payment altogether; troops of women, chiefly from the lowest class, added their eager voices to the general clamour, hanging their swaddled infants at their backs, hoisting them on their shoulders, or extricating with loud outcries and hearty cuffs the stronger urchins, who persistently sought every opportunity of being trampled under foot by the crowd; while over all, at no distant intervals, towered the pliant necks and patient heads of meek-eyed camels, looking sleepily down on the confusion, in calm tolerant contempt, like that of their swarthy riders, for those who dwelt in cities, earning bread by the bustle and competition of sedentary occupation rather than by long adventurous journeys or the vicissitudes of robbery and war. These were invariably objects of undisguised interest to the bystanders; for about man and beast hung a smack of the boundless desert, the wild free air, the untrodden measureless waste, as from the dress and bearing of the mariner seems to exhale a flavour of his adopted element, a breath from the salt breezes of the sea. They were mostly sun-burned and travel-worn, bearing traces of fatigue, hardship, and long exposure by night and day.

To a group of these, standing somewhat apart, surrounding one of their camels, which had lain calmly down, load and all, Ishtar thought well to address herself. They were apparently traders of a superior class, while something in their dress and furniture, denoting that their home was in the north, led her to believe they would offer a more liberal price for jewels than those southern merchants, who might probably have brought with them many such valuables for sale. The men, like their camels, seemed very weary; nevertheless they entered on the business of a bargain without delay.

"The damsel needs but look round," said one, "to see that her servants have no need of such things. We are over-

come with long travel, sore hungered and athirst. What have we to do with clasp and jewel? Your servants are faint for lack of bread. Can they comfort their hearts with gems and gold?"

"Behold the sandals dropping from our feet," pursued another, "the halters of our camels worn to the last fibre! Bring us goats'-hair ropes, woollen raiment, or even garments of fine linen; we will buy them of you, and welcome—at a price."

Sorely discouraged, Ishtar would have protested; but the words died on her lips, and she turned meekly away. Perhaps no amount of eloquence could have served her so well as this apparent indifference. The principal trader leaped down from his camel, and accosted her with some eagerness.

"Be not hasty, my daughter," said he. "The foolish guest turns from a smoking platter, the wise waits till it is cool. Those who desire not to buy may be willing to sell. Will you look on the wares we have brought out of the south?—over the long trackless desert, and through the nations whose hand is ever stretched out to spoil and slay—the Amalekites, the Hivites, and the Anakim.

Ishtar started. The mention of the last-named tribe brought the blood to her brow. She turned back, and replied—

"Show me your wares, if you will, but I too am faint for lack of bread. If I am compelled to take this jewel out of the market unsold, I must creep hence to the city wall, turn my face to its shelter, and so lie down to die."

There was something in her tone that vouched for her truth. He was a merciful man, though he had traded and travelled through the Eastern world. Had she bargained with him, he could have found it in his heart to cozen her out of every article she possessed, and had been proud of his own acuteness the while. But this was a different question. It was like fighting an unarmed adversary, taking a prey that made no effort to resist or flee. His heart melted within him for sheer pity and goodwill. Caution, however, whispered that such appeals might form the new mode of trading lately adopted in Babylon; and while he took the jewel from her hand, he only said—

"We have enough and to spare of such ornaments. Nevertheless, let us look, and judge for ourselves."

His comrades, of whom there were but two, joined in the examination. From their immovable features she could not guess their opinion; but Ishtar gathered that they meant to

trade from the quiet air of depreciation assumed incontinently by each. After scrutinising the jewel at every possible angle, so as to subject each particle of each stone to the searching test of sunlight, the last speaker, who seemed the principal personage, weighed it carefully in a pair of scales hanging at his belt, and observed—

"One hundred shekels of silver would surely be a fair price, O my daughter? But we too have merchandise to sell. Will you not take fifty shekels and your choice of a breadth of silk, a piece of goodly needlework, or a wrought ornament in bronze and ivory from Tyre?"

The clasp was worth three hundred at the lowest, and he felt full of pity and loving-kindness towards the damsel, but a profession is second nature. He was a trader, and must live.

"Your servant is in the hand of my lord," answered Ishtar humbly. "Take the jewel, I pray. Give me the fifty shekels, so that I may buy a morsel of bread, and eat before I die!"

He counted them out, well pleased. It was not often, even in careless pleasure-seeking Babylon, that he could trade to such advantage. But the bargain now stood on a different footing. Ishtar's prompt compliance with his terms caused him to feel bound in honour to give her free choice of the various articles he had named, trusting only that she might not select the rarest and most expensive. Neither he nor his comrades would have refused her for their lives. Their probity, though loose in the extreme, was not elastic, and no temptation could have seduced them into any act they considered a breach of faith. Causing, therefore, another camel to kneel down, they proceeded to unpack its load, turning over for inspection shawls, silks, embroidery, and trinkets, more or less costly, from the workshops of Tyre, Ascalon, or other cities on the sea-coast.

Faint with watching and exhaustion, goods, camel, traders, and bystanders swam before Ishtar's eyes; for amongst a handful of glittering ornaments she distinguished the amulet that the Great Queen had bestowed on Sarchedon, that she had last seen about her lover's neck. With an effort of which few women would have been capable, she recalled her fleeting senses in subservience to her will, and asked calmly to examine the trinket. It was valuable, no doubt, yet more from its exquisite finish than intrinsic worth, and she had presence of mind to appear only desirous of possessing it as a gaudy trifle with which they could have little disinclination to part.

"I will ask my lord," said she, "to bestow on me no more than this ornament I hold in my hand. Also, if a drop be

left in the water-skin, that I may wet my burning lips, for indeed I am faint and sore athirst!"

"It is my daughter's," answered the trader. "My camels, my goods, all I possess, are hers! The water-skin is indeed dried and shrivelled like an ungathered grape, but here is a gourd not yet emptied, a barley-loaf still unbroken. I pray you, eat and drink, my daughter; comfort your heart, and go in peace."

Complying eagerly with the invitation, Ishtar felt her very life returning with each mouthful she swallowed. Had it not been so, she never could have found strength for the task she had set herself to perform. Looking on that amulet, with its bird of peace following the weapon of war through the air, her whole being, her very soul, seemed to go out towards the lover from whom she had been parted with so little likelihood that they might ever meet again.

"Oh that I had the wings of a dove!" thought Ishtar, in the loving impotence of her desire, wishing, with other tortured spirits of every age and clime, but to burst through the invisible, impalpable wires of her cage to seek the rest that none can find—broken in heart and hopes, weary and wounded, yearning only to fly home. And it may be that those who have followed in the slimy path of the serpent shall one day find their bitterest punishment in aimless, endless longing for the wings of the dove.

But could she have flown with all the speed of all the birds of air, it was yet indispensable to follow out the clue she had already obtained in the possession of the trinket that so lately belonged to Sarchedon. Strengthened by food, her womanly wit regained its keenness, while womanly shame bade her disclose but half the truth. It would be wise, she thought, to trust this friendly merchant; yet she dared not confide in him wholly, nor lay open to a stranger all the weakness of her heart.

"My lord has shown favour to his servant," said she. "I desired of him a gift, and, lo, it lieth here in my hand! I was hungered and athirst; he gave me to eat and to drink! Am I not in some sort the guest of my lord? I would fain ask him one question. All my happiness hangs on his lips. As his soul liveth, I implore my lord to tell me the truth."

"Speak on, my daughter," was the reply. "There is no space for falsehood within the curtains of a tent, and he who dwells in the desert knows not how to lie."

"This trinket," she continued eagerly, "you took it from its owner. It hung round his neck. He was a son of Ashur,

tall and comely as a cedar of the mountain, brave as the lion, ruddy as sunset, bright as morning, and beautiful as day!"

The astute trader smiled.

"You know him," said he, "and you love him! It is as my daughter hath said."

"He is my brother," she answered, blushing crimson while she adjusted her veil. "If aught but good hath befallen him, it were better for me that I had never been born!"

"Such a one as you have described," answered the other, "did indeed come into our possession by lawful barter amongst the tents of the Anakim. A slave can have no goods to call his own, and when we discovered beneath his garment this jewel that had escaped the eyes of his spoilers, we might have taken it righteously by force. Nevertheless, the man was strong and warlike. Even in bonds, it may be that he would have done himself some injury, and so lessened his price. It was well that he suffered me to strip it from his neck unnoticed while he looked back upon the camp, as if he had left his very heart with the tribe."

A thrill that, in spite of all, amounted to real happiness shot through her trembling frame.

"Can he not be redeemed?" she exclaimed, clasping her hands eagerly. "Where is he now?"

The trader pondered.

"I too have a brother," said he, "and we parted at a day's march from the tents of the Anakim, as we have parted many a time, trusting to meet yet once again before we die. My course lay hither to the great city; for are not my camels laden with silks and spices and costly jewels, such as rich Babylon must have at all hazards and at any cost? I pray you, damsel, remember I am a fair trader; I ask for no greater profit than enables me to get bread for myself and forage for my beasts. Some there be who scruple not to rob with the scales, as the Amalekite robs with the spear; but such prosper not in life, and long before their beards turn grey, their flesh is eaten by vultures and their bones whiten the plain!"

"My lord spoke of the Assyrian," interrupted Ishtar. "Is he safe? Is he alive?"

"That he is alive, my daughter," replied the merchant, "if care and good usage can keep the life in a valuable captive, I will answer with my head. We bought him at a remunerative price, and my brother is even less likely than myself to let one suffer damage whose welfare is of such marketable value. That he is safe with the other goods I have sufficient reason

to hope. Surely they joined a caravan guarded by more than five hundred horsemen of the desert. Ere now they must have reached the pleasant confines of my home—the broad-leaved oaks, the cool green valleys, and the breezy mountains of the north."

"The north!" repeated Ishtar, aghast and discomfited. "What! beyond Nineveh?"

"Far beyond Nineveh," said the other, "far beyond the boundaries of the land of Shinar, where the banner of Ashur hath never been lifted, the spear of the Assyrian never dulled its point in blood—in the land of corn and wine, pasture and fruit tree, flocks and herds, peace and plenty, the happy hill country of Armenia!"

"Sold to the Armenian for a slave!" was her answer. "O my lord, shall I never see him again?"

He pitied her from his heart.

"Much may be done," said he, "with these three weapons, sword, bow, and spear; more yet with these, time, wisdom, patience. Add but a little gold, and who shall say that aught is impossible? My brother is one of those who, setting before them an object in the plain, turn neither to right nor left till they have reached it. The Assyrian is of fine frame and goodly stature, fit to stand on the steps of a throne. My brother hath determined he will sell him to no meaner purchaser than a king. Not all the wealth of Armenia will tempt him from his purpose, and to the king he will be sold. I have spoken."

Then he turned away to prosecute his business with those who were waiting around for examination of his merchandise, and Ishtar found herself alone and friendless in the crowded market—alone, with a wild foolish hope in her heart, and Sarchedon's amulet in her hand. From the time she lost sight of him, she had never wavered one single moment in her resolution; arduous, impossible as seemed her task, she would not relinquish it even now. Had she needed any further stimulant to exertion she would have found it in the reflection that he, the distinguished warrior, the ornament of a court, the flower of a host, the treasure of her own heart, was a slave! At least she knew where he had gone; at least there was one spot of earth on which her loving thoughts could light, like weary birds, and take their rest. But how to reach him? how to span the cruel distance that lay between? Gazing wistfully on the amulet in her hand, she would have bartered all her hopes here and hereafter, peace and safety, life and beauty, innocence itself, in exchange for the wings of a dove.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

BOND AND FREE

"A HORNED owl in the twilight; a horned owl in the dark! How many horns does my owl hold up?"

A merry laugh was ringing in her ear, a soft hand was laid over her eyes, while the white fingers of its fellow twinkled before her face, and Ishtar recognised the voice of Kalmim, challenging her to one of those foolish games of guessing so popular from the earliest ages with the thoughtless children of the south. It was something to meet a friend, and of her own sex, even though that friend was one with whom her deeper, purer nature had but little in common. Strung to their highest pitch, her feelings now gave way; and leaning on Kalmim's shoulder, Ishtar burst into a passion of weeping that perhaps did more to calm and restore her than all the feminine consolations and condolences lavished by the other, whose compassion, lying near the surface, seemed easily aroused and quickly exhausted.

A weeping girl was no unusual sight in the public places of great Babylon. Exciting neither pity nor comment, Ishtar and Kalmim withdrew unnoticed from the crowd, to stand apart in the shelter of a gigantic fountain, erected for the refreshment of her people by the Great Queen, where the younger woman soon recovered composure to answer the voluble questions of the elder.

"Where have you been hiding, and what have you been doing, and why have we never seen you at the well, in the temple, at market, sacrifice, or on the city wall?" said Kalmim, flirting the water about while she dipped her white hand in its marble basin. "Surely the days of mourning are past, and those of feasting should have begun. Why, then, in the name of Ashtaroth, do I find the fairest damsel in Babylon with her eyes unpainted, her head untired, and—my dear! a dress that looks as if it had been trodden in the dust by every beast in the market? How did you ever get it so rumpled and soiled?

Ignoring this important consideration, Ishtar took the other by the hand, and gazing in her face with large serious eyes replied—

"Kalmim, I believe you would serve me, if you could. I believe you are my friend."

"As far as one woman can be a friend to another," laughed Kalmim. "And that is about as far as I could fathom the great river with my bodkin. Trust me, dear, you are too comely to possess friends, either men or women. Nevertheless, you sat on my knees when you were a curly-headed child, and I—well, when I was better and happier than I am now. I would serve you if I could. By the light of Shamash, I would, though I might hate myself and you the next minute! Take me, therefore, while the good mood is on. What can I do to please my white-faced Ishtar?"

"You have influence and power," was the reply. "He—my father used—I have heard it said that you are deep in her counsels, and high in favour with the Great Queen."

An angry flush rose to Kalmim's brow, and her laugh was not pleasant to hear, while she answered—

"The Great Queen is a woman like the rest of us. I wish I had never seen her haughty face. For days together it was Kalmim here, Kalmim there; who so quick-witted as Kalmim? whom could she trust like Kalmim? Kalmim was never to be out of her sight. I must have had a score of hands, and as many wings as Nisroch, to do half her bidding. Then, in the twinkling of an eye, lo, in the threading of a needle, all is changed, and because the Great King went to the stars—or wherever he *did* go—I am to be cast aside like a frayed robe or a soiled napkin, and must see her face no more. She might have been a little fonder of him while he was here, I think, instead of making all this mourning now he's gone. You would suppose that in the whole land of Shinar no wife was ever left a widow before. Queen though she be, she must take her chance with the others, I trow."

"And are you no longer in the royal service?" asked Ishtar, sadly disappointed.

"In the royal service I must ever be," answered Kalmim, "since I was born a bondwoman in old Nineveh, whence come the fairest of us, after all, say what they will of this great wicked town! I can no more help my bonds than my beauty, and I do not know, my pretty Ishtar, that I am more anxious to get rid of the one than the other. But it vexes me sore, and angers me too, when I think that the queen, because she sits in sackcloth and scatters ashes on her head,

should refuse to admit her faithful slave and servant, who never failed her yet, even to the outer court of the palace. If I were free, like you, my dear, I swear by Baal I would take my leave of great Babylon for good and all!"

"Free!" repeated the girl bitterly, reflecting how little availed her freedom, her birth, even her beauty to attain the one object of her life, in the pursuit of which she was fain to implore the assistance of this bondwoman. "If I were free, as you say, I would leap on yonder camel, with a lump of dates and a barley-cake in my hand, turn his head for the northern mountains, and never wish to see the city walls again."

"I guessed it!" exclaimed Kalmim, clapping her hands. "The daughter of the stars has gone the way of us poor children of earth, as if she too were made of common clay. He has taken your heart with him, whoever he is. I see it all, and follow him you must, at any labour and at any cost. I can feel for you, dear: I know what it is. Now, there was Sethos, the Great King's cup-bearer, as goodly a youth as ever longed for a beard. And, lo, he vanishes one summer's morning with a score of horsemen, rides away into the desert, and I shall never see him more."

"Take comfort," rejoined Ishtar, glad to do a kindness even for this flighty dame. "I left him safe and well at Ascalon, and beheld him with my own eyes drinking wine of Eshcol the night before I fled."

"At Ascalon!" exclaimed Kalmim. "Where Rekamat was—I heard them say so! The treacherous tiger-cat! The false villain! See what it is to let a man find out you have thought twice about him. He cares no more for you than we do for a garment worn a score of times, or a husband we have known a score of years. And yet he swore and protested. Well, I was born under Ashtaroth, and I have been a fool like many another. Nevertheless, the broken jar will mend no doubt, and the empty gourd can be filled again at the stream."

"I think he came not into Ascalon of his own free will," answered Ishtar. "He galloped through the gate like one who rides for life, with a cloud of Egyptian horsemen at his heels."

"I wish with all my heart they had caught and flayed him alive!" laughed the other. "But I might have known him better than to think he would look at that cream-faced Rekamat, for all her delicate gait and her tawny hair. So he escaped with the skin of his teeth, say you,

and was last seen safe in Ascalon? I pray you, is he there now?"

"I know not," answered Ishtar. "O Kalmim, I will trust you. I am so miserable. He entered the city with—with Sarchedon. And the walls were guarded, the watch set, because of the false Egyptian, so that a mouse could scarce creep out unnoticed. Nevertheless, we glided through the gate at sunrise, he and I, and—and, right or wrong, we fled into the wilderness."

"Like a pair of pelicans!" exclaimed the other in high glee. "And so, being in the wilderness, you made yourselves a nest no doubt, and folded your wings in peace, as it had been behind the city wall!"

"The children of Anak surprised us sleeping," sobbed Ishtar, whose tears were beginning to flow afresh. "They killed our dromedary, poor beast, and spoiled our goods—all that we had—a lump of bread and a handful of dates. They spared our lives in pity, but they set me down beside the Well of Palms, and they sold him into captivity. O Kalmim, comfort me, for indeed I fear I shall never see him more!"

Light-hearted and impressionable, the other was ready enough with sympathy, advice, and perhaps assistance, up to the point at which it could inconvenience herself.

"Take heart," said she; "the world is wide, but woman has her wits, as the bird of the air has its wings. Can you not discover where he is gone? Knowing this, surely the bow is bent, and the arrow fitted to the string. You need but let it fly."

"I was guided by Nisroch," was the tearful answer; "for I came hither into the market from the halls of my ruined home and the bones of my dead father. O Kalmim, I watched by them all last night, to drive the wild-dogs away."

Again she laid her face on the other's shoulder, and wept. Kalmim was greatly moved.

"I will help you," she protested. "Indeed, I will. I have friends; I have lovers — scores of them, girl; and in high places too. I will seam my face with scars, tear out my hair by handfuls, but they shall listen to my prayer. What! is my cheek sun-burned? are mine eyes grown dim? I will force my way to the queen! I will humble myself before the prince!"

"The prince!" interrupted Ishtar. "He is in Ascalon."

"Foolish girl!" replied the other. "He is even now coming out from the queen's palace to do justice amongst the people Every second morning he rides forth on a white

horse, with Assarac at his right hand. Grave has he grown, and severe, putting aside the wine-cup, speaking but a word at a time, and scarce suffering the people to look on his face. Ashtaroth, what a face it is! Surely he is more beautiful than dawn."

Ishtar shuddered. To her, for all his comeliness, he was loathsome as a leper, terrible as a beast of prey.

"It is but justice I require," said she, wringing her hands. "Bare justice for an Assyrian-born carried into captivity."

"He shall be brought back by the sons of Ashur with the strong hand," replied Kalmim stoutly. "Who can stand against Assyria in her might? But I know not yet whither they have taken him, nor how you have discovered the prison-house where he is lodged."

"I came into the market at sunrise," answered Ishtar, "to sell the clasp of my father's girdle, that I might eat a morsel of bread. Ashtaroth must have had pity on me; for she directed my steps to those very traders who bought Sarchedon from the sons of Anak. One, who seemed chief among them, spoke me fair, and treated me well. Perhaps he has a daughter of his own. From him I learned, that when they divided the spoil, his brother had taken the Assyrian warrior for his share, and was journeying with him to Armenia, where he would sell him for a goodly slave to stand before the king. I pray you, Kalmim, is it very far to Armenia?"

"It is many days' journey," replied Kalmim hopefully. "But those who have horses and camels need not the wings of a bird. I have heard it said of the Great King, that his sceptre stretched over the whole land of Shinar, his spear to the uttermost ends of the earth, and his arrows reached the heavens. I know not; but I think the sons of Ashur can obtain what they want, even from beyond the mountains of Armenia, if they go to ask for it with bow and spear. These traders, though, are soft and smooth-spoken, false as prosperous lovers, every man of them! How know you their tale is true?"

"By this token," answered Ishtar, showing Sarchedon's amulet in her hand.

Kalmim recognised it at once. Many a time since she missed it from the Great Queen's neck had she speculated on its absence, and wondered what fresh combinations of intrigue and duplicity were denoted by this imprudent generosity of her mistress. Though Semiramis, she knew, entertained a peculiar reverence for the trinket, as possessing some supernatural charm, yet when she bade her tirewoman

go back to search for it in the temple of Baal, there was a restless anxiety in her demeanour not to be explained by mere concern for a lost jewel. And now her eyes were opened. She marvelled how she could have been so dull and blind. She resolved to hold the clue tight, and never let it go till she had turned its possession to her own advantage. Though she tried to look innocent and unconscious, it was impossible to keep down the sparkle in her eye, the crimson on her cheek, while she asked as carelessly as she could—

"Is it a sign between you, and did he send it to vouch for the truth of the messenger?"

"Not so," answered Ishtar. "They took it from his neck by stealth, and the good trader gave it into my hand, because I desired it of him as a gift. When I look on it, I seem to see the noble face of my beloved. O Kalmim, we must deliver him, and bring him back."

"We must deliver him, and bring him back," repeated Kalmim, pondering deeply. In a few seconds she ran through the main points and bearings of the case.

So long as Sarchedon remained a captive in Armenia, it was obvious that he could be of little service to her designs, but if she could by any means recall him to Babylon, a path seemed open that should lead to her own aggrandisement and paramount influence in the palace. She was sufficiently persuaded that the seclusion of Semiramis would last but for a short time; that her masculine intellect would soon weary of inactivity; and that her energies would again rule the nation through the son, as heretofore through the sire. She was shrewd enough to have observed that Ninyas did nothing without the counsel of Assarac; and she had not forgotten Assarac's implicit and slavish devotion to the queen. She was also satisfied that her royal lady had contracted one of those infatuated passions for Sarchedon to which she was occasionally subject, and which her tirewoman's experience reminded her would be gratified at any cost of danger or shame. If, then, she could go to the queen when the days of mourning had expired, and say to her, "I have got your treasure safe in Babylon, under lock and key; I brought him back from Armenia by my own exertions, and you need but lift up your finger to behold him here at your feet," would she not become one of the greatest personages in Assyria, herself the fount of honour, wealth, influence, and promotion? Sethos, she decided, should obtain the leadership of the royal guard, and her other lovers be rewarded, more or less, in

proportion to their attractions. Meantime Sarchedon must be brought back.

"You love him dearly then," said she, "and would shrink from no sacrifice to ensure his safety?"

There was more than devotion in Ishtar's simple answer—

"I would give my life for the life of him."

"There is but one power under that of Ashtaroth to help you at your need," pursued Kalmim. "If the king will send an embassy to Armenia, as to Egypt, for the recovery of Sarchedon, the youth may yet return, fast as camels can travel. But you must make your petition at once, and in person. You are young and comely, though a little too pale. Such faces as yours seldom plead with Ninyas in vain."

Ishtar clasped her hands and trembled.

"Is there no other way?" said she. "There is none in all the land of Shinar before whom I would not rather bow down my face than the prince."

"The prince, girl! what mean you?" exclaimed the other. "Are you mad? There is none can help you in such a matter but the king."

"Only—only," stammered Ishtar, "I fled on purpose to avoid him."

"Fled!" repeated Kalmim scornfully; "whence and why? There is no time to lose. Tell me in a word: has Ninyas, too, taken a fancy to that white face of yours?"

That white face turned crimson, while about brow and lip gathered such haughty defiance, that for a moment the girl looked like her father when he set the battle in array.

"He would have forced me to love him," said she; "but I had rather be lying dead without the city wall!"

"Is it so indeed?" exclaimed Kalmim, a little vexed, it may be, to hear of another woman's conquest, yet highly pleased with the promise of success it seemed to offer. "Then Ashtaroth doth indeed favour us, and the prey is taken ere we spread the net. If he wooed you unsuccessfully, believe me, he is not out of your power yet. You need but ask your price, and he will pay it. That price must be the recovery of Sarchedon."

Love and hatred were tearing at the poor girl's heart—love gained the mastery.

"What would you have me do?" she asked; but her voice was so changed, the other looked anxiously in her face.

"Now you are reasonable," said Kalmim, after a pause, "and will take a friend's advice. So shall all turn to our advantage at last. This must you do: rend that garment

of yours thus, not down to the hem, but so that it falls gracefully away in two pieces, uncovering neck and shoulder. Scatter a little dust on your head—a very little—not enough to dim the lustre on your hair. Then sit you down in the gate yonder; I will show you the place. Wait till Ninyas rides by, coming from the judgment seat. He must be leaving it ere now. When you hear the tramp of the white horse, turn not your face to right or left; but as he draws near, start up in front of him, throw back your veil, wreathe your arms about his knee, pour forth your prayer, and implore your lord to do with you what he will."

"Be it so," answered Ishtar, calm and pale, like one in the grasp of death. "Thus shall I save you, Sarchedon my beloved! But never, never will I look in your dear face again."

CHAPTER XXXIX

IN THE GATE

BOWED to the dust, with rent garments, drooping head, and aching heart, from which the very life seemed pressed out, Ishtar sat herself down in the gate to watch for the passing by of the king, as he rode from the place where he had been administering justice to his people since sunrise. She had not long to wait; the trampling of hoofs soon warned her that the royal troop was approaching, and flinging back her veil, she had scarcely time to rise erect before the well-known white horse was upon her, guided by the hand that most she feared and hated in the world. Its rider, buried in thought, proceeded at a walk, accompanied only by Assarac, the few mounted spearmen in attendance remaining several paces behind. Ninyas appeared unusually grave and preoccupied. His face was somewhat hidden by the fall of a linen tiara and the profusion of his dark silken hair, but in his rounded symmetry of limb, his graceful gestures, and royal dignity of bearing were conspicuous those personal advantages which formed perhaps the only merit of their new ruler in the eyes of the common crowd.

Faint and forced were the cheers that greeted his approach, dark and discontented the glances that followed him as he passed on. He from whom so much was expected had turned out a failure and a disappointment. To cruelty and injustice the people of Babylon would have submitted without a murmur, but for incapacity they had little forbearance; for one who wasted neither blood nor treasure, they entertained a fierce and dangerous contempt. Already loud regrets had been heard among the populace for the iron rule of Ninus and the warlike glories of the Great King. Already whispers, fierce and earnest in their suppression, asked when her days of mourning would be ended; and suggested that the queen should again take part in affairs of empire—should govern Babylon, her own especial city, in person. Even before the seat of judgment, murmurs to this effect were

distinctly audible, and a cry of "Semiramis! Semiramis!" had been caught up and re-echoed in the outskirts of the crowd. On such occasions, the calm face of Assarac was observed to denote secret triumph and gratification, yet clouded with something of anxiety and deep earnest thought. Riding on the king's right hand, he seemed even now so engrossed in meditation, that he was the more disturbed of the two when a figure, rising, as it were, out of the earth, wound its arms round the royal knee, at the imminent risk of being trampled to death, and laid its forehead to the white horse's shoulder in an attitude of heart-broken entreaty and abasement. Merodach must have recognised her. Ishtar knew that the animal avoided touching her with its hoofs, while, in spite of skilled hand and severe bridle, it pressed its muzzle against her fair shoulder with a mute loving caress.

"How now!" exclaimed the rider haughtily. — "What foolish damsel is this who encumbers the royal path, seeing that the sun is already high? Know you not how the people cry without ceasing for justice during the space of two hours after dawn? Stand aside, girl, lest that tender body of yours be trampled like a lily in the dust!"

Ishtar raised her tear-stained face, pale as the flower to which she had been compared, and sobbed out wildly—

"As thy soul liveth, hear me! Only hear me, ere thou ride on in thy might, and crush me to death beneath thy feet! What am I that I should stand in the path of my lord the king?"

Surely he remembered her voice. He seemed strangely disturbed, and the hand that reined Merodach shook till the bridle rang again. Turning to Assarac, he murmured in a stifled voice—

"Bid them keep the people back, I pray you; with point of spear if need be. I will hear what the damsel has to say."

Then Ishtar poured forth her whole heart with an eloquence that could only have been wrung from her by his danger whom she loved better than her very life. She reminded Ninyas of his professed attachment to herself, of their flight through the desert to the south, of her unwilling thraldom, and constant resistance at Ascalon, notwithstanding his rank, his beauty, his exceeding attractions, avoiding, with womanly tact, every allusion that could hurt his self-love, and lavishing, with womanly recklessness, every expression of flattery that could impress on him the immeasurable distance between his handmaid and her lord. Then she bade him judge of her feelings by his own. What had she to live for but the man

she loved? The youth was to her as water in the desert, as a breath of air to one bricked up in a dungeon. She was sick for his comely face. She made her prayer to the king, because she had been taught from childhood he was the representative of Baal in the land of Shinar, the embodiment of truth, justice, and mercy amongst his people. She knelt to him as to Nisroch with the eagle-head. She presumed not to stand before his face without a gift. Let her find favour in his sight. It was the only jewel she had left. Let him take it. Let him but grant her petition, rescue this goodly youth from captivity, and take herself—her life—all she had to give!

In accordance with ancient custom forbidding the suppliant to enter the presence of a superior without an offering, she thrust into the king's hand that amulet of emerald which had already changed owners so many times. Even at her extremity of need she could not help remarking how white and delicate were those royal fingers that trembled round the jewel, how fair and shapely was the arm that shook with some inward conflict of passions, terrible in their struggle against the strength that kept them down. It was marvellous to her that jealousy should have such power over the male nature, and if Ninyas cared so very dearly for her, surely she ought to pity him, she thought, even though she could not love! All this undercurrent of feeling and reflection passed through her mind while she watched every turn and gesture of her lord with the eager eyes of one who balances between life and death. The royal face was hidden by its tiara; the royal voice came low and husky with its haughty question—

"Is it a lover, girl, for whom you make this bold petition? Did he buy you with a trinket and cast you aside in the desert, and will nothing force him back to your arms save a decree of the king? Go to! You seem over-shameless for a maiden,—over-tender for a wife. I have spoken."

She was on her knees again, pressing the rider's garment to her forehead.

"By the glory of Shamash!" she exclaimed—"by the might of Ashur!—by the blood of Nisroch! I am a true woman. May my lips wither, may my tongue drop out, may my heart be consumed to ashes, if I conceive a falsehood in the face of my lord the king! His servant loves the youth—loves him so dearly, that for his sake she would accept death with joy, lifelong bondage with gratitude—that to ensure his safety she would give her hopes, her heart, her all, and consent never, never to see him again!"

The king was certainly changed. Looking wildly up in that comely face, it was colder, paler than before, and the lips turned very white while they asked in a low stern voice—

"How came you by this amulet? Speak the truth, girl, lest even now your eyes be covered and your body flung from the wall. Was it given you by—by this faithless lover of yours?"

"Not so, my lord," answered Ishtar eagerly. "As your servant liveth, it was round his neck when they bore him into captivity, and but that I had come to the market at sunrise to eat bread, I should never have known where they had taken him. I saw the jewel in the wares of an honest merchant, and I learned from him all that my heart desired to know."

Ninyas smiled as if well pleased, and spoke in a softer voice.

"Let him be brought to the palace at once," said the king, turning to Assarac. "An honest merchant ought to be easily distinguished in the market-place of Babylon. I should like to see him, girl, and I should like also to learn whither they have dared to carry this Assyrian-born. How called you him? Sarchedon, was it not?"

"Surely my lord is wiser than Nebo," answered the girl, "to know good from evil. It is even as he hath said. Behold, the king discovered it before my tongue could form the name that was in my heart."

The rider's hand gave such an involuntary wrench to the bridle, as caused Merodach to rear straight-on-end in resentment and surprise. Caressing the horse, and laughing lightly the while, Ninyas continued to question his suppliant.

"They have carried this free-born son of Ashur into captivity. It seems they have more courage than wisdom. And whither have they taken him?"

"Far beyond the northern mountains," answered Ishtar, "into the land of Armenia; and for that he is so comely of face and noble of stature, they will be loath to yield him back, for he is to stand in goodly raiment at the right hand of the king."

"Hear her, Assarac!" exclaimed Ninyas, turning to the eunuch, with flushed brow and sparkling eyes. "This comes of unstrung bows and peaceful counsels, the way of the serpent on the rock rather than of the lion by the water-spring, or the eagle in the sky. Go to! Are the spears of Ashur bulrushes by the river-side? Are his horses ham-strung? Hath the arm of his might dwindled to the lily hand of a maiden? I

tell you, that for every furlong they have taken their captive beyond the bounds of Shinar, I will send chariots of iron and mailed horsemen a league into the land of Armenia to burn, ravage, and destroy, to bring away their gods and lead their men and maidens into captivity! Nay, if so much as a hair of Sarchedon's head shall have fallen, I will sow their country with salt, and blot out its very name from among nations! Damsel, depart in peace; your petition is granted. I have spoken."

Exulting in her success, yet even more bewildered than rejoiced by the good fortune that had gained her object without sacrifice of personal freedom, Ishtar lost no time in obeying the royal injunction. Shrouding her fair face in its veil, she wrapped her rent garments modestly about her, and glided into the thickest of the crowd. Her escape was for a moment unnoticed, while the king gazed thoughtfully on the amulet she had left for a gift; but looking quickly up, as if about to give some directions to Assarac, the attention of each was arrested by tumultuous shouting at the adjoining gate, repeated in a thousand echoes of a thousand voices along the city wall. It seemed that both were prepared for disaffection and disturbance among the populace. They exchanged meaning looks, and Assarac whispered in the royal ear—

"There are twenty bands of spearmen massed behind the rampart; priests and prophets are scattered in the market-places and squares of the city; chariots of iron are harnessed in scores, and horsemen by thousands wait but the holding up of my hand to mount. I pray you give the word, and ere the sun go down, Baal shall exterminate, root and branch, all who question the authority of—of my lord the king."

Looking on the royal personage he addressed, the eunuch's eyes blazed with an admiration that seemed almost too warm for reverence, too passionate for loyalty. At the sound of tumult, the signal-note of conflict, Ninyas started into life with as much fire and energy as Merodach himself. The folds of the tiara fell back, disclosing those matchless features, that radiant face, glowing with just such pleasurable excitement as brightens the aspect of an ardent hunter when he sights the deer. That supple stately form, springing into graceful energy of attitude and gesture, seemed an embodiment of beauty in warlike harness. How could such softness and delicacy be endowed with such resistless might? Surely horse and rider, thought Assarac, formed a pair unequalled the wide world through.

"Keep the men of war back!" exclaimed Ninyas gleefully. "Never take your eye off my right hand. When I raise it thus, let the spears open out by wings, unmask the archers, and bid them bend their bows."

"You will return to the palace!" exclaimed Assarac. "You will not risk that precious life in a city tumult! By the light of Ashtaroth, by the blood of Nisroch, by the safety of the empire, by all you hold most sacred, I entreat you to keep out of danger!"

His voice was broken with real emotion, his features worked convulsively, as if he pleaded for something dearer than life, but a ringing laugh was the only answer to his appeal, and the anxious eunuch could but press on at a gallop to keep near the white horse and its rider, as they made for the great gate of Babylon that looked towards the south.

CHAPTER XL

UNVEILED

LIKE a swan cleaving the waters, Merodach forced his way through the ebb and flow of an eager crowd, even dangerous in the impatience with which it surged to one common centre, where two figures, dusty and travel-worn, as though arriving from a journey, sat patiently on their drooping horses to receive with exceeding calmness the cheers and congratulations lavished by the populace. One of these was in female attire, and enough of the veil and mantle were thrown aside to disclose a beautiful face, recognised with wild enthusiasm by the people of Babylon for that of the Great Queen. Shouts of welcome, acclamations denoting a transport of loyalty and affection, rose on all sides. "Semiramis! Semiramis!" was the ceaseless burden of many thousand voices; while the lowest and dirtiest of the excited multitude demanded angrily the repeal of that law which forbade a woman to reign over the sons of Ashur, insisting that their queen should be invested with supreme authority in this her especial city, the work of her hands, proposing that she should ride at once to the palace, on a pavement composed of their own necks and shoulders, many of them proceeding to fling themselves on their faces with that object forthwith. So flattering a reception seemed, however, to raise no corresponding gratitude in the person to whom it was offered. The beautiful face wore only an expression of malicious amusement mingled with somewhat scornful surprise; while the other horseman, riding in close attendance, looked strangely troubled, whispering doubt and apprehension in the ear of his more composed, if more contemptuous, companion.

Sethos—for it was no other than the Great King's cupbearer who thus found himself in a situation of extreme perplexity—on his arrival in Babylon felt indeed at his wits' end. When he obeyed the summons of his young lord, to ride with him through the desert, day and night, till they reached the great city, which Ninyas, for reasons of his own, proposed to enter in female disguise, he bade farewell to the

grim towers of Ascalon with a light heart, looking on the expedition, though it necessitated more bodily exertion than he loved, as one of intrigue, mirth, and amusement, especially at the end. The little he could gather from Ninyas during their journey failed to prepare him for such a reception as awaited them; and indeed the young king toyed, trifled, and galloped through all these leagues of burning sand as if life had nothing more serious to offer than the jest of leaving his tired attendants, one by one, in the wilderness, and riding his own good horse mercilessly to the point of death.

It had ever been the nature of Ninyas to appear lightest of heart when most he saw cause for vexation or anxiety; nor, indeed, was it without good reason that he quitted his retirement to look after his inheritance in person, and made an effort to retain the sceptre, which he first learned was his own at the moment it seemed so mysteriously to be slipping from his grasp. His conversation with Sethos had been the earliest communication he received of his father's departure to the stars; it filled him with wonder and alarm. Subsequent explanations and comments of the cup-bearer served only to increase his bewilderment. But for the audacity of such a proceeding, he would have felt satisfied that another had personated him in order to rob him of his crown. It perplexed him, too, that he should have received no tidings from the mother to whom he was accustomed to fly in all his difficulties, feeling, perhaps, no little concern for her safety as well as for his own succession. The escape of Ishtar also angered him to the core, while of Rekamat he was wearied, even to disgust. He resolved, therefore, on returning without delay to Babylon, there to examine for himself the opposition with which he had to contend, adopting the attire of a woman, as most likely thus to avoid recognition, while he prosecuted his inquiries and ascertained the nature of a conspiracy that must have been organised for his destruction.

It seemed, therefore, inconvenient and untoward in the last degree to find himself the object of such an ovation as now greeted him, denoting enthusiastic attachment, not for himself, but for the mother to whom he bore so close a resemblance. He felt his position more embarrassing than ever, when it dawned on him that in his own capital his own people mistook him for the queen. A score of times he strove to address them, and a score of times his voice was drowned in the deafening acclamations that arose the moment he opened his lips.

His patience was failing fast, and an angry light already glittered in his eyes, when the whole expression of his face

changed to one of extreme consternation and dismay. Dashing up at a gallop, and halting within two strides, sat a figure on a white horse, so like himself in his ordinary royal attire, that for a space in which a man might have counted a hundred, his senses deserted him, and, speechless from sheer amazement, he could but gaze with dilated eyes, like one horror-stricken at some vision from another world. The face, the form, the scarlet robe, the princely tiara, the golden collar, the jewelled sword, the very trappings of the horse, were all his own; and in the gesture with which that figure suddenly drew rein to station itself motionless over against him, he seemed to see *himself*, not in the foolish disguise he had lately assumed, but as it had been his custom to ride through the streets of Babylon, the darling of the Assyrian people, the flower of young heroes, the fairest of young princes, in the Eastern world.

Brief as was the interval during which his presence of mind forsook him, it was long enough to permit one of those rapid strokes by which, in love, war, and policy, bold spirits gain the mastery; the other Ninyas had also paused for a moment, as if confused and uncertain how to act, but Assarac, pressing to the white horse's side, whispered a few earnest words in its rider's ear—words that brought a flash of energy and intelligence into the beautiful face of his listener, ere the eunuch turned in the saddle to impress some hasty directions on a captain of ten thousand, who was in attendance at his back.

Meantime the multitude shouted louder than ever, crowding, as they believed, in eager homage about their queen, unconscious of the pressure caused by a ring of spearmen circling gradually round Sethos and the veiled figure at his side. Mingled, however, with the protestations of loyalty and affection lavished on Semiramis, rose many a seditious outcry, many an angry burst of impatience and contempt against the name of Ninyas.

As the spearmen encompassed the new-comers, there was much increase of ill-humour amongst the multitude, thus wedged together by a band of iron that compressed them from without—women shrieked and fainted—children were trampled under foot—strong men, reeling and swaying to and fro, cursed audibly, directing savage scowls and fierce abuse at the rider of the white horse, as though their ruler were answerable even for the excesses of a disorderly crowd. The storm increased, the human waves surged, swelled, and roared, everything indicated a tumult, and still the serried ranks of spearmen narrowed their circle, drawing closer and closer round the little knot of figures on which all eyes were fixed.

"The white horse bore his rider to this point of vantage"

"Never had man or woman such a chance!" whispered Assarac. "By the body of Ashur, his sceptre has come down from the stars into your very hand. It is but to close your fingers, and you grasp it once for all!"

The rider of the white horse replied by a look of intelligence in the eunuch's face, and a gesture of supreme contempt for the noisy multitude.

Assarac's eyes answered with a gaze of devoted and passionate adoration.

"Opportunity," he murmured, "is the harvest of the gods!"

But the sentiment seemed lost on the ear to which it was addressed; for the fiery white horse, obeying hand and heel, began to plunge with such formidable energy as soon cleared a breathing-space, so to speak, in the receding crowd. And now the roll of chariots was heard without the gate, while a score of trumpets answered each other in swelling notes of war from all quarters of the city. Men knew that for every trumpet rode a thousand of Assyria's terrible horsemen, armed with bow and spear. It was well, thought Sethos, for his lord and himself, that they were so safely guarded. Stalwart warriors, massed ten deep, kept the people off on every side; but with thunder of wheels and bray of clarions, a certain panic took possession of the crowd, and it closed in so heavily on the plunging Merodach that, active as was the animal, it seemed in danger of being swept off its feet. Had they once gone down, neither horse nor rider would ever have risen again.

Assarac exerted all his strength and all his courage to keep in close attendance. On his face was graven the set expression of one who elects rather to die than fail in his desire; and under that storm of howls, and threats, and bitter execrations, the eunuch bore himself like a man.

An ever-increasing pressure in the crowd had now forced the white horse against the surface of the city wall, which sloped upwards from within at such an angle as permitted a nimble bowman to surmount the incline, and reach a narrow platform, whence under cover of the rampart he could discharge his missiles in safety against an enemy. It was very steep, and afforded a foothold slippery and insecure to the last degree. Measuring it in one rapid glance, his rider's hand and heel roused Merodach's courage to the utmost for his effort. With a bound like a wild deer, a shower of sun-baked clay, a hideous moment of poise, struggle, and recovery, the white horse bore his rider to this point of vantage and security, standing there motionless, save for a quick vibration of his

ears, a prolonged snort, expressing triumph, defiance, and a sense of danger past.

Throned in their recess, the pair seemed rather to have come down from the gods than gone up from amongst men. Such a feat, with such a people, could not but produce an irresistible effect. Voices raised a little earlier in scorn and hatred now shouted enthusiastic admiration and approval. One such display of skill in horsemanship seemed enough to regain for their reckless ruler all the popularity that had been withdrawn.

Every eye was now riveted on the white horse and its rider. At a signal that the latter desired to speak, unbroken silence fell on those assembled thousands, and not an accent was lost of that sweet measured voice, clear, full, and musical in the cadence of its every tone.

"Sons of Ashur," it said, "men of Babylon, conquerors of the world, ye love the line of Nimrod dearly, but ye love not *me!* Tell me not ye have changed in one brief moment, because of a bold leap and a willing steed. I am unworthy to reign over you. I have been weighed, and found wanting. I have tried, and failed. Baal in his temple has warned me to abandon the reins I possess neither power nor wit to guide. I have seen your reception of Semiramis. I know — none better—the worth and wisdom of the Great Queen. Sons of Ashur, in her favour I abdicate; to her hand I resign my sceptre, at her feet I lay my crown. May the queen live for ever! I have spoken. And now stand aside, sons of Ashur, while I come down, lest I hurt a hair of the head of one of her especial people, whom she will rule with a mother's love, whom she will lead to triumphs beside which the glory of Ninus himself shall pale and fade away!"

With these words, Merodach was urged to the downward leap. A column of spearmen cleared a passage through the crowd, and the brave white horse, followed by the eyes of all Babylon, galloped off at speed towards the palace of the Great Queen.

When men turned to look for her, marvelling at her strange appearance among them weary and travel-worn out of the desert, lo, she too had vanished with her attendant, guarded, it was said, by hosts of archers, clouds of horsemen who thronged about her so thick and close, that none might look on the royal person nor come within hearing of the royal voice. Nevertheless, each went to his home with a pleasing prospect of coming rejoicings, of war and triumph, feast and revel, harp, timbrel, and beat of dancing feet, splendour in the palace, plenty in the suburb, jovial days and merry nights throughout great Babylon once more.

CHAPTER XLI

A SERPENT ON A ROCK

SOUTHERN sun beat fierce and pitiless on the terrace of the queen's palace at Babylon. Hewn out of the solid rock, a smooth and glistening pavement refracted those noonday beams like burnished metal. Not a breath of wind arose to cool the heated air; not a bird dared spread its wing against the burning sky; yet Assarac stood motionless and thoughtful in the open unshaded space, heedless alike of throbbing brain, blistered skin, and sandals scorching under his very feet. Suddenly he started and stepped quickly forward, like one about to trample something beneath his heel. Checking himself in the act, he paused to mark a serpent gliding along the unfriendly pavement, as if seeking for a hole or crevice wherein to shelter its shining skin and smooth, flat, cunning head.

He had thought to slay it; but no, it was not in him to do the creature harm, as he stood watching it with wistful eyes, and bitter thoughts, and a strange sad feeling of compassion at his heart. Uncoiling many a sleek and glistening fold, it worked its way slowly, painfully, traversing in all its length and breadth the surface of that pitiless pavement, so different from the dank morass and tangled brake for which its nature yearned. The wise reptile, type of caution, intellect, sagacity, measured its cunning in vain against the beautiful impenetrable slab, could find no solace in the hard unyielding stone.

"Is it better, after all," thought Assarac, "to wind, like this wily creature, along the devious paths of policy, or to take the straight and open road, leading to danger indeed, but to danger that may be foreseen, assailed and vanquished with the strong

hand? Would I be the tiger, blind with desire of blood, leaping at the wild deer's throat, to slake a cruel thirst? or the serpent, crafty, patient, persevering, exhausting all its ingenuity, all its devices, against an obstacle smooth and impenetrable as this adamantine pavement, heated by the sun's rays, not to warm and cherish, but to scorch, wither, and consume?"

Thus meditating, with an unusual cloud of despondency on his brow, Assarac turned away, and traversing the large cool hall of the queen's palace, walked thoughtfully through leafy wilderness and shaded pleasure-ground to the silver temple of the Fish-God, where he had been summoned by Semiramis, that he might assist with his counsels the great design on which her heart was bent.

Kalmim, who had again resumed attendance in the household of her royal mistress, rejoicing that the days of mourning were at last expired, waited as usual in the porch. With winning smiles and sparkling eyes—since Kalmim's bow was always bent for practice as for slaughter — she drew those silken hangings that screened the presence of Semiramis, and admitted him to the court of ivory and silver, as she had admitted Sarchedon once before, when that comely warrior arrived from the camp, bearing the signet of the Great King.

The queen had not forgotten. Something in the gesture of her tirewoman, something in the murmur of doves, the babble of waters, the scene, the place, the listless noonday heat, recalled that other interview but too forcibly now, and she received Assarac with a languid loving smile. The eunuch's whole nature glowed beneath her glance, while prostrating himself at her feet, he pressed the hem of her garment to his lips, with such rapture and devotion as he had never felt for Baal, Nisroch, Ashtaroth, nor all the host of heaven. Her favourable looks emboldened him to speak; and after the formal salutation, "Great Queen, live for ever!" he offered his advice unasked, in a burst of impassioned eloquence, very different from his usual composed immovable demeanour.

"It is a war," said he, "of which the new-born babe in the land of Shinar may never live to see the end, unless indeed it should terminate in an advance on Babylon by innumerable hosts, under the leadership of Aryas the Beautiful, and the sacking of our city by those swarms of fierce savages who congregate in the wind-swept deserts of the north. The Great Queen's arm reaches far, her hand is strong and skilful; but, trust me, she is about to plunge it in a very hornets' nest!"

"And crush them like locusts in my grasp!" exclaimed

Semiramis, all her beauty kindling into flame, while she threw up her graceful head in feminine defiance. "I make no war with drones, sparing their lives and taking away their gods, yet exacting small tribute of cattle or slaves: but when the insects carry stings, it is worth while to conquer and destroy. They breed *men*, I hear, beyond the Zagros range — men stronger and fiercer, like their own storms, the farther you march towards the north. I will carry back ten thousand of their champions, chained in pairs, to make sport for my fickle people here in Babylon. The blind fools! they are as proud of their queen's might as if it were their own. 'Twas a good stroke of yours, Assarac, that enabled me to resume my woman's garment at will. You welded the iron like a cunning smith while it glowed and sparkled on the forge. I could not patiently endure the constant restraint; I never should have guessed how irksome it is to be a man."

"Irksome, indeed," said the eunuch, "so long as women have softer skins, stronger wills, and harder hearts. But the prince himself made the very opportunity that foiled him. I did but whisper in the Great Queen's ear to seize it. And though she drew her bow almost at a venture, the arrow flew deftly home, according to her wont."

"Nevertheless," answered Semiramis generously, "it was your eye that aimed the shaft, though my finger pulled the string. I have always esteemed the head that counsels far above the arm that strikes. By the beak of Nisroch! I believe that I have not in the land of Shinar so wise and true a servant as this high-priest of Baal!"

For answer, he was fain to kiss the hem of her robe once more. When he tried to speak, the words seemed stifled in his throat. With one of her rapid glances, she even detected something like a tear glisten in his eye.

"It is far better and easier," she continued, "to reign for myself, and meet my people frankly without disguise. While I personated my son, I felt in every word, every gesture, the likelihood of detection; and they were beginning to hate me as a king. I saw it every hour. To hate without fearing—a fatal sentiment in such subjects as mine, whom I can govern easily as I can rein Merodach, but by far different means. The ruler of Babylon must have a frank brow, a close mouth, a sharp sword, a long arm, and an immovable heart. When I reigned here in the absence of the Great King, ere he—ere he —went before us to the stars—who can reproach me that I ever turned one step aside, for any consideration of pity or compunction? And yet, did you not hear, my friend, how

they yelled and shouted, leaping for joy to think they had got their queen back again? Ah, they have not come to the end of it yet! And now counsel me, Assarac. What is to be done about the prince?"

"He is safely disposed," answered the eunuch, keeping his eyes steadfastly off her face. "Nevertheless there is no gate so close but it may be opened by treachery, no wall so high it cannot be surmounted with a ladder of gold. The captains of ten thousand are loyal and trusty warriors, yet who among them could resist a tempter offering the leadership of the host? I would bestow my lord Prince Ninyas in a prison from which no captive escapes, a fortress friend and foe are alike powerless to break through. There is yet a golden throne vacant in the sky, and he might take his place in it without delay, by the side of the Great King."

It was a ghastly proposal; yet Semiramis seemed to listen without astonishment, and rather in sorrow than in any outburst of anger or dismay. She answered in a sad, thoughtful, and dejected tone—

"Such a measure would be wise, I grant, and would set the question at rest for ever. But I must not—I will not—consent! I cannot but think the doves that fed me in my infancy have imparted something of their nature to mine. I loved the boy dearly all his childhood through; none the less, perhaps, that in form and features he seemed so entirely mine own. I was a good mother to him, as any sun-burned peasant who brings her babe into the vineyard on her back; and, will you believe me, Assarac? he cared more for a rough word or a rude jest from the Great King than for my fondest caress, my smiles, my very tears. When I have pleaded with him, even to his own advantage, he has turned his back on me, and laughed outright."

How strange it seemed that any man on earth could see that matchless face unmoved, hear that sweet voice unwon! But Assarac dared not speak, lest all his self-control should fail, and Semiramis proceeded with her complaint—

"He loved the meanest dancing-girl out of the market better than the mother to whom he owed his life, his beauty, his favour with the Great King. He would leave me for horse, and hawk, and hound, without a word—the ring of a timbrel, the flash of a torch, the clink of a wine-cup, would have taken him from beside my dying bed; and yet I cared for the lad through it all, sheltered him many a time from his father's anger, and screened his weakness, his incapacity, his vices, from the people over whom he thought some day to

reign. I have done too much for Ninyas, and I have had no return. When I sent him to Ascalon with that white-faced girl, I thought we were rid of his follies for a space, to the profit of everyone concerned. I never dreamed she would leave him, nor that the child loved its toy so well as to follow even to the gate of Babylon. That he should ride through in woman's attire must have been arranged expressly by the gods. Had he come in his own person, I had been compelled to act with less mercy. I thank you again, Assarac, that you saw the opportunity at a glance. One so sage in counsel, so quick in action, cannot but be skilful in war. Ere this year's dates have turned to russet, you and I will flaunt the banner of Ashur in the very face of the beautiful king before his gate at distant Ardesh, and water our horses, whether he will or no, in the swift Araxes. War is the sport of kings, and am not I more king than queen when I mount my chariot in harness and headpiece, armed with bow and spear?"

"And does love count for nothing in the project?" asked the eunuch, with so much of reverence as masked, but did not quite conceal, a bitter sneer.

Semiramis turned from him in obvious displeasure: under the delicate ear he marked her very neck grow crimson with a blush. He bore pain well, this priest of a false god, and proceeded to urge his objections in the calm tone befitting one who offers counsel to a superior.

"Has the Great Queen counted well the cost?" said he. "Has she considered how many bones of men and horses must whiten the line of march to rearward of her armies, ere they pass the Zagros range? Can her chariots of iron penetrate its wooded defiles? How shall her camels climb its steep and slippery rocks? Say she advances to the fertile country beyond the hills: she must either encounter those terrible savages, who worship a naked sword as the sons of Ashur worship Nisroch and Baal—gigantic warriors, clad in skins, but armed with bow and spear, eating human flesh and drinking horses' blood—or she will behold a barren plain before her, its peasants fled, its wells choked up, its harvest wasted by fire, affording neither food nor water to man or beast. When she has surmounted these obstacles, with the loss of half her strength, she will find herself face to face with a countless host of horsemen from the northern desert, under the leadership of Aryas the Beautiful himself."

In many respects, she was a woman to the core.

"I have heard he *is* beautiful," she answered with a light laugh.

His reply was grave and sad—

"Could not he have met Semiramis, at the frontiers of her empire, in all honour and splendour, without encounter of armies and shedding of blood? Must he, too, rue the youthful manhood and comely face that bring him a captive to the Great Queen's chariot-wheels, because of her ungovernable desire"—

"How, slave!" she burst out fiercely.

"For glory and warlike renown," continued the eunuch; adding, humbly enough, "My life is in her hand. Let the queen take it, here, at the shrine of Dagon, rather than do aught which shall prejudice her honour and her name."

She looked appeased.

"It is mine honour," said she, "that this matter immediately concerns. I send an embassy, demanding a certain captive at the hand of Aryas; and what is his reply? Neither gifts nor tribute, nor words of homage and respect, but two winged arrrows bound together by a link of gold. It needs not the dark wisdom of the Egyptian to interpret such a sign. He means that this is no question of barter or ransom, but one to be decided between us by bow and spear. It is the issue I most desired in my heart."

"He means that the Comely King and the Comely Queen should join their hosts, and bind themselves together in a link that can never be dissolved," murmured the eunuch, almost with a groan.

She smiled in beautiful scorn.

"I have the arrows in my quiver," said she; "the first shall be shot into his camp, the day I meet him face to face, with its feathers dipped in blood. It may warn him, perhaps, that I have sworn to drive the second with mine own hand through his heart. There are goodly men in the world, I trow, besides Aryas, and one ten thousand times as fair is wasting in captivity even now. Prate not to me, Assarac! I tell you, that if I wrap the world in flames, I will have Sarchedon back, here in Babylon, before this year's dates have fallen from the palm! I am sick till I see his noble face again. It is enough: I have spoken."

Then the eunuch knew he was dismissed, and passed out of the temple sadly, thoughtfully, with drooping head, folded hands, and slow dejected step. Crossing the terrace once more, he looked about for the serpent; but it was gone. Calling to mind its struggles and windings, he wondered where and how it could have found rest, foiled at every turn by the glowing surface of that smooth unimpressionable stone.

CHAPTER XLII

BEFORE THE ALTAR

BUT for priest, as for warrior, there is no respite from daily duty, to be discharged with scrupulous care and unfailing zeal, however sore may be the heart within, aching under linen garment or proven harness of steel. Assarac must needs officiate at the altar of his god an hour before the sun went down, even had a victorious enemy been wasting the city with fire and sword, or had his own life been about to terminate with the first shadows of night. How he loathed the mummery, that yet made him all he was; the machinery of which he knew so well each cog-wheel, catch, and lever; the false glare and sparkle that seemed so poor a substitute for the steady rays of truth! And yet he dared not whisper, even to his own heart, how mean and paltry was all this artifice by which he climbed to power.

He had a new religion now—that religion of the heart which sweeps wiser creeds away in a flood of blind unreasoning devotion; which degenerates, without a misgiving, into the wildest fanaticism, and can number its martyrs, as compared with those sacrificed to any other superstition, at the rate of a hundred to one. He did not conceal from himself that he loved the queen—he, for whom the love of woman must ever be as the blind man's desire for light, fiercer, perhaps, and more ungovernable, because of the very impossibility that it should be realised. Cruel are the pangs of a hunger which is not even fed by hope. Intolerable is a thirst to which the very offer of water seems but mockery and aggravation. Nevertheless, he did not care to strive against his folly now. For a time, he had believed himself invulnerable—thought his very nature kept him safe—and that, for him at least, there must ever be an insuperable bar between admiration, regard, sympathy, and the slavish devotion which others call love. After admiration had become indiscriminating, regard unreasoning, and sympathy painful, he shut his eyes to the truth for about a day; but

when he opened them, yielded without effort, plunging wildly into the abyss, owning a certain morbid pride, in the consciousness of his self-immolation, the while. And now heart, brain, and faculties were all saturated with the poison. His strong will yielded gladly to the spell; his keen intellect was content to follow where it ought to lead; and had the queen bid him help her, as she said, to wrap the world in flames, his own hands would have brought the fire, though it scorched him to the bone.

To say that he loved is to say that he was jealous; but the torture he suffered was to that of other men as a cancer feeding on the vitals to a flesh-wound lacerating the skin. *They* might fret and struggle, gnashing their teeth, raving vengeance, threatening reprisals, alternately worsting the rival and reproaching the idol; but *he* must suffer in silence, smiling however sad—erect however crushed and humbled—outwardly serene though troubled to very madness within. And all unvisited by a ray of light, a glimpse of hope, even by the dream of what *might* be, which has gilded so many a weary night-watch with fleeting visions of the dawn. Surely, through its very degradation, there was something sublime in such utter self-abasement, such complete self-sacrifice of love!

And yet his port was never more assured, his step firmer, his aspect more dignified, than when, after this interview with Semiramis, that had stung him to the core, he took his place at the altar to offer the usual evening sacrifice to his god.

The sun was sinking, and its level beams shed a crimson flush on the white garments of a band of priests, as on the spotless alabaster columns that crowned the lower storey of the temple, supporting those upper chambers, of which the mysteries were veiled to eyes profane. A hundred steps, broken by five stately terraces, led down to an open space, in which thousands were crowded to witness the ceremony with upturned faces, that glowed no less vividly than did altar, shrine, and priests in the warm red lustre of a setting sun. As in the morning to the east, so in the evening sacrifice the people turned themselves to the west. A score of oxen stood lowing behind the altar. It seemed the poor beasts felt some forebodings of the fate that awaited them; though not till incense had been burned and drink-offerings poured out were their throats to be cut, at a given signal, and their flesh roasted for the consumption of that lavish god, whose daily service thus required the presence of a thousand satellites. These stood, marshalled like warriors, in rear

of Assarac and Beladon, who assisted him in his functions. Swinging their censers, they continued chanting, or rather muttering, in a low voice and a minor key, certain formal repetitions, detailing the names and quality of their deity.

After a short delay, during which Assarac kept his eyes steadily fixed on the setting sun, he advanced before the altar, followed by Beladon, who waved above his superior's head the mystic ring, which, enclosing a representation of wings, formed the emblem of that incomprehensible power whose attributes were ubiquity and eternity. The eunuch's gait and gestures were solemn and imposing in the extreme; his ornaments of massive gold, his spotless robes, deeply embroidered, falling in heavy folds about his person, his fine stature and noble bearing—all were calculated to enhance his own dignity and that of the sacred office he fulfilled. Turning slowly to Beladon, he received at the hands of that assistant a golden cup filled with wine to the brim, and poured from it gravely a libation to the four quarters of heaven, finishing with the west. A hundred priests then advanced, chanting their hymns in time to a measured march, a hundred timbrels rang in sounding strains to the praise of Baal; and while fires were kindled, while smoke went up, and music swelled, the blood of twenty oxen flowed round the altar, filling the channels cut to receive it with a bubbling crimson stream. Assarac and Beladon stood on each side, facing the people, wrapt, as it were, in a holy trance. Men looked on them in awestruck wonder as votaries under the immediate influence of the god, whom Ashur himself, coming down from his throne, might address face to face, who were communing even now in spirit with the souls of departed heroes, with all the powers of all the host of heaven. Little did they think how the eunuch's whole being was possessed at that very moment by a human vision of the brightest eye that ever shone in promise, the sweetest lips that ever kissed or smiled; while his attendant, yielding to desires yet more of earth, earthly, pierced the crowd with a gaze that, for all its semblance of holy preoccupation, did but seek a well-known female figure, alluring of form, lavishly attired, and not too closely veiled.

No sooner had the sun gone down, the stars come out, than Beladon, whose time was now his own, sought one of those courts which formed a communication between the temple of Baal and the king's palace, supposed by the people of Babylon to be occupied by Ninyas in a retirement from which their present temper would have rendered it

extremely dangerous for him to emerge. Semiramis had returned to live in her own royal dwelling, where she held such state as caused all former magnificence to pale. The king's house, therefore, as it was called, became comparatively deserted; and with the exception of its wooded parks or paradises, fenced off for game, no spot in the whole city could have been so secluded as that in which Beladon lingered, pacing to and fro, stopping, muttering, glancing about him in fretful perturbation of spirit, peculiar to one waiting for a woman on whom he cannot quite depend.

"At last!" he exclaimed, catching sight of a veiled figure gliding amongst the arches that skirted the court, like a ghost in the dubious starlight. "At last! And I saw you in the midst of the multitude before the sun went down, looking on at the sacrifices. Where have you lingered, woman? and what have you been doing since?"

Kalmim, for it was none other, raised her veil and laughed in his face.

"Who hunts learns cunning," said she. "Who toils learns skill. Who waits learns patience. With cunning, skill, and patience, even a priest may come at what he desires."

"Kalmim," he exclaimed earnestly, "do you believe there is nothing I would shrink from that you bade me undertake? Are you assured that I am constant and true as your own shadow on the wall? Do you trust me as I trust you?"

She had an object; and laid her hand on his arm with a pressure that implied a world of confidence, while she answered—

"Stanch as string to bow, hound to slot, a woman to her mirror, and a man to his desire. We have never been less than friends, Beladon; why should we? Perhaps, at last, we may be something more."

He had an object too; therefore, resisting the impulse that prompted him to pass his arm round her waist without further ceremony, he assumed an air of respectful devotion, and observed—

"I have no secrets from Kalmim; I trust her without reserve. There is not a question she could ask me I would hesitate to answer from my heart. Will she do as much for me in return?"

"Of course!" she burst out frankly, while her bold black eyes looked him through and through. "What do you desire to know?"

"Arbaces was my friend," he replied abruptly. "The Great King's chief captain fell shamefully murdered in his

own dwelling. His daughter was carried off by force into the desert. What has become of her now?"

"You love her!" she exclaimed, turning her head away in feigned vexation. "You love Ishtar, the cunning white-faced wanton! I ought to have known it—I did know it all along! And yet *you*, Beladon—I thought you so different from the others. Oh, it is hard to bear! How could I have been so weak? How can I be so foolish now?"

She had put him thoroughly in the wrong. Surprised, alarmed, perplexed, perhaps not a little softened and flattered, he hastened to excuse himself with more ardour than discretion.

"It is for Assarac," he stammered, "not for me. The chief priest saw her a while ago in the market, and she has escaped him—him who can track a bird in the air surely as a camel on the sand! He bade me trace her. That is why I came to you."

It passed through Kalmim's mind, that if Assarac set such store by the discovery of Ishtar's refuge, the information she had power to give would only be of value so long as it was withheld. If she would get her price, she must beware of submitting her merchandise to the light of day. The good-will of her customer too must obviously be secured in the first instance.

"And you do not love her yourself, Beladon?" she sobbed. "You are sure of it—you will swear it—on—on—the altar of your god?"

The storm had lulled—yet not too suddenly. The heaving bosom, half-unveiled, though somewhat deep in colour, was not without its charms.

"By every altar of every god that reigns!" answered the deluded priest. "By Ashtaroth, queen of love and light; by Baal, in whose very presence even now I stood; and by your own sweet self, whom I worship perhaps more fervently than all the host of heaven put together!"

"I cannot but believe you," she answered, smiling sweetly, while she abandoned her hand to his caresses. "Nay, it would make me very sad not to believe you, Beladon. Will you always be true to me?"

"Always!" he exclaimed, with an appearance of sincerity that might perhaps be attributed to his habit of making the same profession to every woman who was kind and fair. She, too, was not without practice, and accepted the assurance calmly enough.

"You do love me," she whispered, "and, indeed, if ever I

could bring myself to think of a priest, it should be one like—well, like Beladon, perhaps, though I sought in every temple through the land of Shinar till I found him. And now, if I tell you all I know, frankly and freely, will you promise me what I ask in return?"

"I promise," said he, pressing her hand to his lips.

"Will you swear?" she asked.

"Can you not trust me without an oath?" he pleaded.

"Freely," was her answer. "But you must swear it nevertheless, to please me."

"I do swear!" he exclaimed. "By the Seven Stars—the Consulting Judges—the might of Baal—the blood of Nisroch himself!"

"And by the three wings in the circle," she added impressively.

He hesitated; but the dark eyes, softer and sadder than their wont, were looking straight into his own, the balmy breath was on his cheek. Kalmim had never before seemed so kind, so womanly, so lovable, and he committed himself to his promise by swearing that solemn oath which, neither in letter nor in spirit, did a son of Ashur ever dare to break. She looked more than satisfied.

"I can tell you all about Ishtar," said she, "so long as she remained within the city walls, because I, who speak with you now, accompanied the girl, for old friendship's sake, beyond the southern gate, even to the Well of Palms, when she departed. She rode an old and sorry camel, bearing but a skin of water and a lump of dates. She was veiled and clothed for a long journey. I had nursed her on my knees when I was scarcely more than a babe myself; and I helped her, I own (for she is poor and lonely now), to beast, clothes, and provisions—though I begged hard of her to remain, little believing her earnest assurance, that if she could but find them, she had powerful friends in the wilderness. Nevertheless, even at the Well of Palms a tall rider had stopped to water his horse, and she did but speak a word in his ear, when he dropped on the sand to do obeisance at her feet. I was frightened, and fled to hide myself in the vineyards; but when I raised my head, they were riding away together into the desert with their faces towards the east. My own opinion is, that she has vanished from the earth like her mysterious mother, and gone back to the stars from which she traces her descent. And now, Beladon, that I have told you all I know, I claim from you the fulfilment of your promise and your oath."

CHAPTER XLIII

THE SNARE OF THE FOWLER

HE had sworn by the eternal wings, and there was no escape. The wisest men in their dealings with women have pledged themselves, ere now, to give precious metal in exchange for dross, and Beladon made no better bargain when he matched his wits against the keener intellect and finer perceptions of the queen's tirewoman. With grave aspect, and much decreased ardour, he answered somewhat ruefully—

"I will do your bidding—not only for mine oath's sake, but because of the love I bear you. Speak, then—your servant is waiting your commands."

"It is not much I desire," said she carelessly, though had there been more light he might have seen the blush rising to her brow. "We women have strange fancies, you know; I would fain revisit my old haunts, and walk once more by night through the palace of the Great King."

"Impossible!" he exclaimed, turning pale. "You know not what you ask"—

"Impossible!" she repeated, mocking him. "There is no such word acknowledged by the servants of Semiramis or Baal. Nothing is impossible, nor impenetrable, nor improper in the city of the Great Queen!"

"But my life would hang on your discretion," urged Beladon, much disturbed—"on the silence of a woman, whose very office it is to repeat everything she hears, whether false or true!"

"And where could it hang more safely?" she retorted. "Nay, Beladon, your welfare and mine are blended together like the bronze and gold of that buckle on your belt. The interest of one is the interest of both. Besides, think of your oath! Lead on."

There seemed no help for it. Taking her by the hand, he guided her softly through those darkened courts and passages; urging, in impressive whispers, the necessity of secrecy, laying

no light stress on the peril he was himself encountering for her sake. Thus gliding like shadows, they passed stealthily through the great hall of the king's palace, immediately beneath that Talar, or upper chamber, into which Ninus had ascended when he poured his last drink-offering to the host of heaven, and was seen by his people here on earth no more.

She could not help shuddering while she recalled that awful night, when a great horror seemed to brood over the city, and men looked blankly in each other's faces, wondering what should befall them next. Catching sight of the famous carbuncle over the gate, glowing, even in utter darkness, like a living coal, her fortitude gave way, and she screamed aloud. However obtained, Beladon's experience seemed to have taught him that vigorous measures were judicious in cases of feminine alarm. Seizing her arm so impressively that she well-nigh screamed again for bodily pain, he whispered in her ear—

"It is death for both of us if we are discovered by the priests of Baal, who now guard the palace. I know my brethren, Kalmim, and I *love* you. Listen! I wear a knife at my girdle, and you shall die first!"

Thoroughly frightened, she hung her head, and held her breath. Could this be the free-spoken light-hearted Beladon, whom she had hitherto esteemed a mere frivolous idler, fit only to fill a place in the showy pageants of his god? He was rising rapidly in her good opinion, while in her characteristic love of excitement a certain thrill of pleasure sweetened the terror that admonished her how many risks she ran at every step.

Traversing the great hall, they emerged on a terrace commanding one of those pleasure-grounds for which Babylon was then no less famous than in after years for the celebrated hanging-gardens that adorned the age of her decay. It was a wilderness of shrubs and flowers, of grove and rock and stream—fit haunt for the game with which it had been plentifully stocked—fit retreat for luxurious royalty during the heat of an Assyrian day—fit hiding-place to secrete the fair favourite of a jealous lord—fit stronghold to immure the person of an imprisoned king. Its recesses were distinctly visible from the terrace twenty feet above, on which Kalmim stood. At that elevation she looked over its entire length and breadth, while a bright moon, high in the heavens, flooded every nook and corner of this paradise with a light like day.

It was now dead of night, the wild bird had gone to roost,

the wild deer was couched in its lair, yet a dark object moved across the lawn, on which Kalmim's eyes were fixed, slowly, stealthily, with long-continued pauses, like some feline creature prowling for its prey.

"Come away," whispered Beladon in her ear. "You have traversed the palace; you have seen the king's garden. It is time to depart."

She made no answer. Her eyes were fixed and shining; her face set like that of a sleep-walker, or of one horror-stricken in a dream. The figure turned slowly round. Its garments fell disordered and awry, its hair was dishevelled, its mien wild and scared, but none could mistake the beauty of that pale startled face; and in the miserable object thus stealing, shivering through the moonlight, Kalmim did not fail to recognise the person of Ninyas the king.

Surrounded by a dense column of spearmen, on whom threats, protestations, and remonstrances were alike wasted, the hapless son of Ninus and Semiramis had no sooner entered the city of his inheritance, in ill-advised disguise, than he found himself a helpless prisoner under the very eyes of his assembled people, shouting enthusiastic welcome of his return. So wisely had Assarac's measure been taken, so skilfully had he disposed the large force at his command, that Ninyas and his attendant, spite of their struggles, found themselves engulfed, as it were, and swept away in a resistless rush of spears. Their horses' bridles were seized, the animals themselves urged to a gallop, the guards who hemmed them in drowned with noisy cheers even the acclamations of an excited populace; and so the whirlwind swept on unchecked towards the king's palace, where all Babylon was persuaded its beloved queen had betaken herself, there to assume the royal diadem and sceptre, ere she sought her own dwelling on the other side of the river. But Ninyas shuddered while they hurried him under the outspread wings of those colossal bulls; for something told him they guarded a prison-gate, obdurate and impenetrable as the very granite from which their huge proportions were hewn.

"It is all over," he whispered to Sethos. "The bow is broke and there are no more arrows in the quiver. This is one of the Great Queen's master-strokes. I ought not to have trusted her, and yet I thought my mother loved me too well to have worsted me like this!"

Whereto his follower, from whose smooth and easy nature fortune, good or bad, glided without making much impression, only answered—

"A silken cushion is a softer couch than the desert sand; a palace in Babylon is a nobler lodging than the fortress of Ascalon. Baal himself knows not what the coming hour may bring, but the three wings never cease to turn their everlasting wheel, and the spoke that is lowest one moment comes uppermost the next!"

The cup-bearer's philosophy was so far borne out, that the royal prisoner found no reason to complain of his personal treatment. His banquets were sumptuous, his pleasures magnificent, his retinue submissive, as if he were in truth a king; but, turn which way he would, he encountered the smooth faces and downcast looks of the priests of Baal, who answered his questions with irritating professions of ignorance, and waited on him with a subservience maddening in its vigilant humility. To those whose very existence depended on the favour of Assarac had been confided the care of this important captive, and scrupulously they fulfilled their trust. Though he wandered at will from court to court and hall to hall of the roomy palace—though he might take the air, when it pleased him, in its gardens, or follow the chase in its wilderness—he knew that never for a moment was he unwatched—felt that words, looks, gestures, all were noted and reported, that his very thoughts were known; for while many of his wishes seemed anticipated, his attempts at escape were foiled almost before contrived.

This constant supervision could not but tell on such a nature as that of Ninyas, could not but injure a constitution already sapped by luxury and indulgence. His health gave way; his mind became affected. He drank wine indeed, freely, but neither ate nor slept, wandering listlessly to and fro, chiefly in the open air, regardless of time and season—during the hours of darkness, as under the glare of noon. Had it not been for Sethos, who attended him with touching fidelity, his intellect must have wholly succumbed, and perhaps the purpose of his incarceration would have been accomplished. But the cup-bearer exhausted all his ingenuity to rouse and keep alive the faculties of his lord, desponding, nevertheless, more than was natural to his cheerful spirit and tendency in all things to hope the best.

Kalmim, watching the king with sudden frightened gaze, marked how pale he had grown and wan, how shrunken seemed his stature, how loose the costly garments hung on his limbs. Could he see her? She knew not. He started indeed, and stood at gaze like a frightened deer, then muttered and ran on, looking up at the moon, pausing after a few

steps, with drooping head and downcast eyes, to stare on the ground beneath his feet. She was a hard, bold, pleasure-loving woman, yet her heart melted within her, and she wept.

"Are you satisfied?" whispered Beladon, in accents of considerable alarm. "I tell you, it is death to know our secrets, death to look on the sight you now see. Will you not depart ere it be too late?"

But Kalmim, it is scarce necessary to observe, had another object besides that of an idle visit to the king's palace, in thus cajoling her admirer and risking discovery by the dissolute priests of Baal. She had reason to believe that Sethos shared the captivity of his lord, and with Sethos she resolved to speak, if such an interview could be brought about by woman's wit, woman's duplicity, or woman's charms. Laying her hand caressingly on his arm, she shot one of her sweetest glances in Beladon's face, and whispered—

"Be patient with me, if you love me. I do but ask that you will take me hence to the cedar gallery. I know my way then to the outer court, and so can depart in peace."

Her quick wits reflected, that as a communication existed between the lawn and the cedar gallery, Sethos would be there in attendance on his lord.

The young priest pondered in some perplexity. It was his turn to watch all night over the seclusion of this important prisoner, and he had counted on the society of Kalmim to beguile the tedious hours till daybreak; but the risk of discovery by his comrades was too great, the penalty they would surely exact too hideous, and, for her sake, he thought better of his enterprise, even at the last.

"You do with me what you will," he said, after a pause, in which she almost believed she could hear her heart beat. "If I let you go free now, you will promise to steal softly out, silent as the dead. Whatsoever you see you will forget; whomsoever you meet you will pass unnoticed. All that takes place here must be as a vision of the night, to vanish with dawn of day. Swear it, by the Serpent of Ashtaroth!"

"By the Serpent of Ashtaroth!" she repeated, glad to escape on such good terms; and, true to her easy careless nature, added in a whisper that sent Beladon well-pleased to his watch, "I am not ungrateful, as you know; when shall I see you again?—to-morrow, by the temple of Dagon, at noon?"

Nevertheless, her cheek paled and her breath came quick while she stole through the cedar gallery, because, light and

fickle as she was, she did entertain for the cup-bearer something of that mysterious preference which makes a woman instinctively conscious of his presence whom she thus distinguishes from the rest of mankind; and, though she could not see five paces before her, she felt that Sethos was there, and would accost her as she passed. He could be vigilant enough for the safety of his lord, and, if he was indeed slumbering, her light step brought him to his feet at a bound. The next moment she was in his arms, with her head on his shoulder.

"I have risked everything to see you!" she sobbed wildly; "life, and more than life. O Sethos, you are a prisoner to those who know not mercy, suffering none to escape. Do they use you well?"

His composure was sadly disturbed. It was startling enough to be accosted in the dead of night by this beautiful vision, glowing and panting in his embrace; but yet more surprising, surely, to find himself an object of such interest to the queen's tirewoman. It is but justice to say that his first thought was for the safety of his unexpected visitor.

"How came you here, Kalmim?" he exclaimed, "and how are you to get away again? Know you not that we are closely guarded by the priests of Baal? If they found you in their precincts, all the wings of Nisroch would scarcely save you from their wrath."

"I am not so bad a captain," said she, hanging fondly to his arm, "but that I have secured my retreat. I made Beladon guide me to this spot. I know the secret passage hence to the outer court. It is guarded by a hundred of the neophytes, hewers of wood and drawers of water for the temple. They would as soon dare question Semiramis herself as the favourite tirewoman of the Great Queen. It is of you I am thinking, Sethos. It was to find you I came here at dead of night—to see you, to comfort you, and to consult upon some plan for your escape."

The moon shone faintly into the gallery. By its light she could observe how sad was his brow while he answered, pointing to the terrace—

"Kings on their thrones have armies at command, and hosts are left them after hosts have melted away. But this king in a prison hath but one subject to do his bidding. Shall not that servant stick closer than a brother, cherishing for his master a love surpassing the love of women?"

"It is impossible to save you both," said she despondingly.

"Then save the king," he answered simply and with a cheerful smile.

"Nay, Sethos," said she; "I would peril much for your sake, because—because—you never asked of me anything for yourself, and what you bestow on man or woman is given freely and without an afterthought. But Ninyas is one, and you are another. If I am to risk life and limb, it must be for the cup-bearer, not for the king. I am not like an armour of defence, to be put on or laid aside at will. Steel headpiece and linked habergeon ward off death from this man as from that; but, trust me, there is some difference between a harness of proof and a woman's heart."

He looked kindly in her face, and a thought seemed to strike him.

"Even here, in our imprisonment," said he, "there sometimes reaches us an echo, faint and feeble, of rumours that stir the outer world. Is it true the Great Queen has summoned an innumerable host to march forthwith on this expedition to the north?"

"It is true," said Kalmim; "and she leaves me here at home—me, without whom a while ago she could not lay a plait nor plant a bodkin. But that you are here in captivity, Sethos, and I shall be near you, it would have angered me bitterly, and I had reproached her roundly to her face. But let her beware! A smouldering flame is not a fire extinguished; and none was ever yet the better for offending Kalmim, with or without a cause."

"In the queen's absence, there must be a governor of the city," he whispered. "Will the obedience of the people be given to such a one when their ruler is many a day's march away? O Kalmim, if Ninyas be ever righted, ever sit on the throne of Ashur in the palace of his fathers, I, even I, shall stand in a dress of honour at his right hand; and who but Kalmim will then really sway the sceptre, far and wide, over the whole land of Shinar?"

Her eyes flashed, her cheek glowed. No woman is so empty, so frivolous, but that she willingly entertains a project of ambition; and the last watch of night had passed away, dawn was already glimmering on the horizon of the desert, while Sethos and his visitor were yet taking earnest counsel together how they might restore the dynasty to its rightful heir, and sap, till it crumbled into ruins, the glory and power of her who was now supreme mistress of the Eastern world.

CHAPTER XLIV

THE VEILED QUEEN

IN all her reflected splendour as the wife of the great conqueror—in her richest lustre of youthful beauty—in her noblest state of royal magnificence while she administered for an absent husband the affairs of his boundless empire—never did Semiramis appear so glorious, so beautiful, or so queenly, as when she passed in review, on the frontiers of the land of Shinar, the innumerable forces she had collected, less, indeed, to gratify the cravings of ambition than of a softer yet more engrossing sentiment, which in her woman's heart predominated over desire of conquest and love of war.

Even with her untold resources, unscrupulous strength of will, and unquestioned power, it was no light task for the Great Queen to muster such a host as might invade the strange and distant regions for which it was destined, if not with certainty of victory, at least without prospect of defeat. To the haughty Assyrian, polished and luxurious, though fierce and warlike, that rude inhospitable country, from which he was fenced by his northern mountains, seemed awful as the land beyond the grave. For him, the word "Armenia" meant a place of horror, mystery, and romance. With Egypt he was familiar as with the sandy desert that parted him from his ancient enemy. Of Ethiopia, notwithstanding its scorching suns and endless wastes, he had formed his own ideas, sufficiently extravagant, attributing to its burning clime many demons, monsters, and other prodigies, yet wholly satisfied that all the powers of the south, in or out of nature, were as nothing before the face of Baal and the might of Ashur. The warlike Philistine tribes, even the redoubtable children of Anak, he had fought against, with varying success, gradually absorbing them in his own dominion or pushing them farther into the wilderness. It was his custom to conquer wherever he found room to drive his chariots and wheel his horsemen; but he had never yet penetrated beyond the Zagros range to the snowy peaks, the shaggy woods, the

dreary wilds of the north. That he should meet with peril and adventure such as the veterans of Ninus had not even dreamed, he was fully persuaded; that he should overcome all obstacles, he had been no son of Ashur had he not implicitly believed; but that he was engaged in a formidable undertaking, and would encounter a powerful foe, seemed obvious from the enormous levies collected, and the gigantic preparations made to carry out the war. The whole expedition was commanded to assemble within a few days' march of the frontier, there to receive final orders, and pass in review under the eyes of the Great Queen.

Wearing a dazzling harness of steel inlaid with gold, and a burnished helmet, on which blazed a ruby of such size and splendour that its rays seemed to play round her head like a plume of fire, Semiramis, standing in a war-chariot, revealed to her assembled host a beauty brighter than the metal, richer and more lustrous than the gem. Close by her wheel, so that she could mount him at a moment's notice, was led Merodach, caparisoned with crimson and gold. Not a warrior in the host who looked on him but swore that white horse with his eyes of fire was well worthy to carry so precious a burden. She seemed to prize him dearly, laying her hand on his smooth and swelling neck in frequent caresses, which the horse acknowledged with arching crest, brightened eye, and quivering ear, looking about him, nevertheless, as if not wholly satisfied, and neighing loudly on occasion when a burst of martial music, or the tramp of an armed column, seemed to wake in him certain memories of the heart, so faithful and so touching in that creation man is pleased to call the brute. Though Semiramis had broke him to her hand, and tamed him to her will, she could not teach the horse to forget his rider. Perhaps she loved him none the less that ear and eye seemed always on the watch for his absent lord.

Hanging diagonally against the panel of her chariot, within ready reach of her royal hand, swung a quiver of sandal-wood, containing but the two arrows which the Comely King had sent in answer to her haughty demand. She had sworn by Ashtaroth never to draw bow till she came face to face with Aryas, and then to return him his own warlike tokens in deadly quittance, accompanied each with five hundred thousand men.

Flashing back the light from its polished surface like a mirror of steel, the queen's shield, all chased and embossed with gold, was suspended at the back of her chariot. As the coveted office remained unfilled, every mighty man of war in

the host had in turn believed he would be selected to bear it before her in battle; but Semiramis, having long since made her choice, kept her own counsel, determining to face the weapons of her enemies unfenced until she had set *him* free to protect her person, who was never out of her thoughts; who had obtained, perhaps from his very indifference, so strange an ascendency over her wild and wilful heart.

Assarac, the eunuch, well pleased to accompany the expedition, coveted more than others this honourable post. When captain after captain had been passed over, a sweet intoxicating hope bade the priest's brain swim, and so changed his character that in a transport of enthusiasm he could forget alike the exigencies of policy and the dictates of common sense. Descending from his chariot, he approached the position Semiramis had taken up, while the flower of her armies passed by in countless thousands, and, making his obeisance, proffered a request that he might be permitted to guard her safely with his life, in terms of the humblest devotion ever offered by a subject to a queen. She laughed in his face—a kind, frank, hearty laugh, that stung him to the quick.

"What are you thinking of," said she, "my trusty sage and counsellor? Surely that weight of steel on your brow has disordered the workings of your keen and subtle brain. Know you not, that when Semiramis mounts her war-chariot, she drives in the fore-front of the battle? I tell you, man, I have had shafts and javelins flying round me thick as locusts on a field of barley in the blade! I have seen the stoutest captains of Ashur cower beneath that deadly hail! What would a priest of Baal do in such a storm?"

He was deeply hurt, and showed it. Had not he, the priest, the eunuch, confronted dangers in her interests at home to which the reddest battle-field that ever ran with blood was but a game of play? He felt within him a spirit of fierce and reckless daring far above the animal courage of the spearman, but he only answered sadly—

"I could at least die at the feet of my queen, making of my body a pedestal for her to crush and trample, if it raised her but an inch!"

With a cruelty, the more pitiless that it seemed so utterly unconscious, she turned on him her soft alluring glance, her sweet bewildering smile. Perhaps, because of his very nature, she was more lavish of such endearments to him than to others; perhaps, in sheer wantonness of beauty, she cared not what they were, nor how many, whom she scorched to death

with the fire she thus flung carelessly about; but the avowed regard, the frank kindness with which she treated her devoted servant, were at once the provocatives and the punishment of his presumption. Meanwhile he, the counsellor, the reader of the stars, the man of statecraft, of wisdom, the priest, the eunuch, was blindly, madly, in love with his queen!

"Could I spare you?" said she earnestly, even tenderly. "Where should stand the pedestal from which Semiramis may look over a conquered world, but on the far-sighted wisdom, the unshaken fidelity of her best and truest servant? I tell you, Assarac, that you and I, beardless though we be, have more skill of war than all the captains of all this marching host, that rather than lose your counsel, I would send the half of mine armies, bows, spears, and auxiliaries, back to the homes they quitted at my command. And yet look on them, priest. By the beauty of Ashtaroth, these are not men to be despised!"

While she spoke, the chariots of Assyria were filing past her, two by two. Each, drawn by its three horses, contained its complement of warriors—its heavily armed bowman, his charioteer, and shield-bearer, all of whom were on occasion formidable foot-soldiers, strong, fierce, and skilled in the use of deadly weapons. In their midst waved the scarlet-and-gold banner of Ashur, representing Merodach, god of war, standing on a bull, with a drawn bow in his hand. Their appointments, their discipline, their very looks seemed to ensure victory. The queen's eye sparkled, and the colour rose in her delicate cheek.

"'Tis a gallant show!" she murmured; "each comelier than his comrade, and every captain of ten thousand fit to mate a queen. Is it worth while to hazard all for one so little different from the rest? Yes; I hold that man was made for woman's pleasure, to destroy him how and when she will!"

The eunuch, hearing her last sentence, smiled sadly.

"So be it!" he answered. "The altar must have its victim and the flame its fuel, but the votary is none the less destroyed that he is consumed in sacred fire."

She heeded him not. The war-chariots had passed on, and all her faculties were concentrated on a troop of mounted auxiliaries, small indeed in number, but of gigantic stature, riding on horses strong, swift, and terrible as the desert wind with which they were accustomed to compete.

"What have we here?" exclaimed Semiramis, holding her bow above her head, and thus bringing the whole array to a halt. "Have the winged bulls of Ashur come down from

their pedestals to march into Armenia? Are these riders men or giants? Were their horses bred on earthly plains or are they born from the fire and the simoom? Behold! Surely they are led by a woman! As I live by bread, another warrior-queen! but veiled and shrouded like a housewife in Babylon, stealing out at night to the feast of Dagon. Halt them, I say! And, Assarac, command her hither to my chariot-wheels forthwith!"

The eunuch made haste to obey, and the small column formed line at once, facing Semiramis, man and beast quivering with repressed strength and spirit, held in subjection by the habit of warlike discipline. Their veiled leader took her place in the centre, sitting her horse tranquil and immovable as a statue. A tall well-armed warrior rode out, however, from her ranks, and dismounting, prostrated himself before the queen, while his horse, waiting for him, watched his motions like a dog. Rising erect, it did not escape the notice of Semiramis, that his lofty head was on a level with her shoulder, as she stood above him in the war-chariot.

"Whence come ye?" asked the queen, "and wherefore are ye ranged under the banner of Ashur, commanded by a woman like myself?"

"Thy servants are children of Anak," answered the leader. "They are free as the wild ass of the desert, paying tribute and owning subjection to none. They came out of the wilderness at the summons of the Great Queen, neither for gold nor spoil, but by her bidding whom their prophets foretold, a daughter of the stars, who has come down to lead her chosen tribe into the north."

"Doubtless, from her seat on high she could see far and wide," replied Semiramis with grave irony; "and she has made no idle choice. By the beard of Nimrod, I have never set eyes on such men! And she, that veiled woman on the black horse, is your captain, then? How are ye assured she is indeed a daughter of the stars?"

"By the light in her eyes," said he simply. "Once before she appeared among us, and we knew her not, but suffered her to depart in peace, according to the prophecy—nevertheless, when she came a second time, the fire-god cleared our sight, and we beheld in her face the glory of those whom earthly mothers bore on the mountains to the sons of heaven. Our fathers looked for her in vain; but she has descended for us, their sons; therefore at her behest have we gathered under the banner of Ashur, in the service of the Great Queen."

"Trust me, you shall not be idle!" exclaimed Semiramis:

adding, with some curiosity, "And this queen of yours? Is she then always thus shrouded and invisible?"

"It is death to look on her face," answered the son of Anak. "When she unveils before the enemy, behold, he will be consumed and waste away like water spilt on the sand. May the queen live for ever!"

Semiramis scarce concealed a smile.

"It is well," said she graciously, making him a sign to retire. "When the time comes, I doubt not you will quit you like men! Like men!" she repeated, turning to the eunuch; "rather like the giants of our fathers' time, whom ye equal in size and strength. Surely, Assarac, we may take the Comely King by the beard with warriors like these—tall as camels, strong as wild bulls, fierce as lions, foolish as the ostrich, true slaves of Ashtaroth, veiled or unveiled, eager to ride to death at the wave of a woman's hand!"

He looked wistfully after the stalwart forms, sitting their horses so proudly, as they trampled on in a cloud of dust; and his heart swelled with bitter sadness while he asked himself, which of these lusty champions would pour out his life for her so freely, so gladly as he, the eunuch, the priest. Must he always be tongue-tied? Would he never have courage to tell her? Could she not guess it, see it, feel it?

Oh, if she knew! If she only knew!

CHAPTER XLV

ARYAS THE BEAUTIFUL

THOSE personal advantages of strength and beauty which caused the captivity of Sarchedon in a distant land served also to obtain for him royal notice and approval when he arrived at the place of his destination. The merchant who had purchased him from the Anakim knew well the price commanded by such specimens of manhood in an open market; but he was also aware of the fictitious value the king of Armenia attached to men of goodly stature and comely looks, who were skilled in exercises of war. This wily trader laughed in his beard while he reflected on the excellent bargain he had made with these simple children of the desert, from whose tents he led away his Assyrian purchase towards the mountains of the north.

Sarchedon, notwithstanding anxiety for the fate of Ishtar, and sad forebodings of an endless banishment from his own country, had become so habituated to reverses that they affected his appearance and bearing but little; while, in spite of mental uneasiness, health and strength could not but increase under the care of the kindly merchant and his companions, journeying easily on, with frequent halts, breathing night and day the free open air, keener and purer as they neared those wooded mountains that formed a natural defence for the frontier of the Armenian king. The trader, whose avocations led him to visit different countries bordering on the land of Shinar, spoke fluently the dialects of all. Springing from a common root, the language differed so little from his own, that Sarchedon mastered without difficulty such idioms and address as became an Armenian slave in presence of his lord. When, therefore, he reached at length the rush-

ing waters of swift Araxis, and beheld the towers of Ardesh against the clear pure northern sky, he was fit, thought the trader, in every quality of mind and body to stand in a dress of honour before Aryas the Beautiful himself.

Ushered into the presence of the Armenian monarch, Sarchedon, lifting his eyes to take note of his future master, actually started to behold a form and figure that seemed, as it were, the reflection of his own in some magic mirror, glorifying and enhancing every quality for which he was himself most conspicuous. He beheld a man of similar stature, frame, and countenance; but the stature was a trifle loftier, the frame even more shapely, more graceful; while over the comely face, with all its kingly dignity, played a light smile, so feminine in its softness that it might well have irradiated the beauty of a twin-sister of Sarchedon.

To outward splendour of jewels and apparel the king owed nothing. His garments were of the coarsest texture and the simplest shape, such as became a hunter of the mountains who would have every limb free and unfettered for the chase. The bow in his hand, though tough, well-seasoned, and of formidable length, was rudely tipped with elk-horn, the sharp straight sword on his thigh hung in a frayed leathern scabbard, the sandals on his feet were of untanned hide, and one of them was stained with blood. Yet Sarchedon gazed on him with an admiration he was unable to control. He had seen Ninus in pride and pomp of warlike power, Pharaoh dazzling in the blaze of his golden throne. The one, without his chariots and banners, might have been a mere war-worn spearman, the other, denuded of priceless gems and shining raiment, a peasant or a slave; but this man, standing unadorned, save by his comely face and noble bearing, looked every inch a king.

Twice he prostrated himself in unconscious and involuntary homage, and twice Aryas the Beautiful smiled on him well pleased; for he too could not but acknowledge the noble bearing and fair exterior of this stately captive, vowing in his own mind, that if the courage and intelligence of the Assyrian were in any proportion to his good looks, he would promote him without delay to the most honourable post in his court, that of bow-bearer to the king on all dangerous expeditions, whether in warfare or the chase.

As time rolled on, there sprung up a strange feeling of regard and attachment between these two men, so alike in person, so different in all besides. Such a feeling as is indeed rarely reciprocal when race, religion, and station are

wholly at variance, when one is a monarch, the other a captive, one master, the other slave. Nevertheless, Aryas took no small pleasure in the society of Sarchedon, and the Assyrian entertained in return for this foreign prince a sentiment of loyal fidelity that bade him ignore hardship or danger, and count life as a thing of little cost in the service of his lord.

These feelings, the result of gratitude for kindly courtesy and gentle usage, grew to utter and entire devotion, from an event that took place soon after Sarchedon had been appointed bow-bearer to the Armenian king. With all its feminine beauty of expression, the face of Aryas was that of a brave resolute man, well suited to such an athletic and graceful frame, as enabled the Comely Monarch to excel in bodily exercises demanding strength, agility, or endurance. He was passionately fond of the chase, and followed out his favourite pastime with a persistency and reckless daring that rendered it more laborious, and even more dangerous, than actual war. The Armenian lion, bred among the glens and fastnesses of those colder regions, was doubtless inferior in size and ferocity to his African brother, or even to that which Ninus loved to hunt on the sunny plains of the country between the rivers ; yet was he a formidable antagonist to one who went out to meet him on equal terms, discarding the advantage of horse or chariot, but advancing on foot to take his enemy by the beard, opposing teeth and talons only with sword and shield. Such was the practice of Aryas the Beautiful, and Sarchedon could not control a transport of generous admiration when he witnessed the confident courage with which this royal Armenian slew the lord of the forest in single combat, rousing him to spring rampant against his buckler, and stabbing the mighty beast from beneath that defence, with well-directed thrusts of a broad two-edged sword in its tawny sinewy chest.

They were together in a deep ravine of that chain of mountains where tradition declared the first ship to have rested with its various cargo and its God-fearing crew, when the raven flitted round it to and fro, when the white bird of peace came back with an olive-branch in her mouth, ere she left it for evermore. Crowned by the dark and silent forest, the grey rock rose precipitous on either side. The king's retinue remained with their horses at a distance, and Aryas followed his prey into the defile, attended only by Sarchedon in his capacity of bow-bearer. It did not increase the Assyrian's confidence to know that his quiver was empty

and his bow strained. Had Aryas been overpowered, he could have rendered him no assistance; and the horsemen must have gone round many furlongs ere they could have ridden down the mountain-side into this deep and dangerous gorge. Nevertheless, Aryas the Beautiful, with the bright smile and jaunty step of a peasant-girl going to market, tracked the lion's footprints one by one till he came up with him; and when the formidable game turned at bay, observed calmly to his follower—

"You are strong, Sarchedon, and I will help you; but 'tis a weighty carcass for you and me to carry up that steep when we have slain him. Nevertheless, I must have his skin at any cost. I want it for a foot-cloth in my war-chariot."

Ere he spoke again, the lion was quivering in its death-pangs at their feet, and the king had drunk his fill from a clear cold mountain-spring, sparkling like a diamond on a cushion in its mossy velvet nest. With no little labour they carried the dead monster to their companions; and then for the first time it occurred to Aryas that the life of his attendant would have been somewhat wantonly risked if he had lost his own.

"Up in these mountains," he said kindly, "we are no longer lord and servant, but true comrades and brother hunters of the wood. That is why I love to come here. But we all take our share of sport and danger alike. Wherefore did you not tell me you were unarmed? Had my foot slipped on that strip of turf, you would have found yourself in no maiden's embrace, my friend; and stout as you are, yonder, I think, lies a better wrestler than you."

"It was for his servant to follow where my lord led," answered Sarchedon modestly; adding, with the inborn pride of his nation, "The sons of Ashur are little given to fear; but if a man lacked courage, he might borrow all he needed from such an example as is afforded by my lord the king."

"Nay, my friend," replied Aryas, laughing, "I have no such superfluity to lavish, for I see my danger clearly when I confront it. Nevertheless, where there is no fear there is no courage, as there can be no fortitude where there is no pain. But I will not suffer my followers to risk life for my amusement; and when we reach the dark forest you see yonder across the valley, to drive the mountain-bull from his covert and chase him over the plain, you shall be as well armed and mounted as myself."

By such frank dealings with his inferiors, such kindly consideration for others, the Comely King had so attached his attendants to his person, that it was generally believed amongst his subjects he possessed some magic amulet compelling all that came about his person to love him and do his bidding. Perhaps they were not far wrong, and the charm he used had in it much of strange and subtle power; for men cannot resist a fair face, a frank manner, above all, the kindly sympathy of a brave and generous heart.

Leaping on his horse, the king bade Sarchedon change his bow, replenish his quiver, and follow him across the defile. As he plunged down the steep after his leader, over slabs of rock affording but slippery foothold, and through broken ground clothed with tangled brushwood, Sarchedon found himself wishing more than once for the sagacious instinct and obedient paces of his own Merodach. The animal he rode was strong, active, and full of mettle. For all common purposes he could not have desired a better; but when a man is galloping at speed over unforeseen obstacles, where a false step is a certain downfall, he learns to appreciate that electric sympathy, the result of constant companionship, which constitutes so subtle and mysterious a link between the horse and its rider. Merodach would obey an inflection of the body readily as a turn of the rein, would spring to the gentlest pressure as to the lustiest shout; but Merodach stood picketed far off under a southern sky, and Sarchedon's horse was on his head twice ere he rose the opposite hill to come up with his leader, who had halted for a few moments that he might look about him and observe his ground.

"We have the wind of them," said Aryas, pointing to a few indistinct dun-coloured objects glancing like shadows in and out amongst the trees. "But they are disturbed, and have left off feeding. When their heads are up like that, they mean moving, and pretty quickly too. Dost see that broad-leafed oak standing by itself there over the waterfall? Gallop round it, man, without drawing rein, and you will be in the thick of them. They will not expect danger from that quarter, and even if they do make a rush for it, you will turn the old bulls to me."

While Sarchedon obeyed, the Armenian king unwound the scanty fold of linen that formed his head-dress, and permitted it to float at length on the breeze, thus distracting the attention of the wild cattle, now thoroughly on the alert, from their enemy. Sarchedon galloped on unnoticed so long

"Was rolled up by the wild bull in a confused mass."

as his horse's footfall was lost in the roar of the torrent. When within a bow-shot, however, the herd became aware of his approach, and forming line almost like the horsemen of Assyria, paused for a space while they roused themselves to fury, throwing the earth about them with horn and hoof. For once the king's woodcraft was at fault. Preferring, as it seemed, a known to an unknown danger, they elected to bear down on the advancing horseman rather than make further acquaintance with that long mysterious strip of white which had hitherto engrossed their attention. Sarchedon now found himself called on to sustain the charge of the whole infuriated mass. While he fitted an arrow to his bow-string, his horse snorted and trembled, its eye turning blue with terror. He could but hope to discharge one shaft at the foremost and then take his chance with the spear.

"The fool!" muttered Aryas, sitting like a statue, though eagerly on the watch, "not to keep on their flanks. It was my fault," he added; "I should have warned him."

Then he shook his horse's bridle and charged down at speed amongst the herd.

In the meantime the entire mass, headed by the oldest and heaviest bulls, came thundering on against Sarchedon. Their leader he transfixed, indeed, with an arrow through its mighty neck; but the animal, with a roar of rage and pain, only lowered its head and made at him with the more fury. Had he been on Merodach, he might have escaped; for watching its attack with wary eye, he would have evaded the collision, and stabbed it as it passed by; but the horse beneath him had now become unmanageable from fright, would answer neither heel nor bridle, and turning its flank towards the enemy, was rolled up by the wild bull in a confused mass, with its prostrate helpless rider.

Looking wildly out from under his horse, Sarchedon saw the conqueror's eye glow like a living coal, felt its warm slaver streak his own defenceless face, and knew that ringed, curved, massive horn, brandished aloft with sidelong menace, would only descend to be buried in his entrails. Already the bitterness of death seemed past, when a horse's head showed over the wild bull's massive shoulder, an arm was raised to strike, and the ponderous brute went down almost across Sarchedon's feet, with spine and marrow deftly cloven by one lightning stroke from the sharp hunting-blade of the Comely King.

Extricating himself from his fallen horse, the Assyrian bowed his forehead to the ground, and kissed his preserver's feet.

"My life is as a prey," said he, "delivered into the hand of my lord the king, who has saved it at the peril of his own. Therefore, in storm and sunshine, peace and war, good and evil, I am his slave for evermore."

Aryas was measuring the dead bull's horn with his bowstring.

"I can get slaves enough for gold," he answered carelessly. "When I venture life, it is to buy a *friend*."

Sarchedon's voice came very low and hoarse, and in his eyes shone the unaccustomed glitter of tears, while he replied—

"When I fail my lord, may my steed fall, may my bowstring rot, may my javelin splinter, and may the woman I love betray me to another for a measure of barley or a paltry handful of gold!"

CHAPTER XLVI

A WIND FROM THE SOUTH

DAY after day the friendship of these congenial spirits grew closer and more familiar. The Assyrian had related his own eventful history to his new lord, and Aryas seemed never weary of listening to the tale. Bold, enterprising, and imaginative, he loved to hear of the conquests of Ninus, the prowess of the sons of Ashur, the splendour of Babylon, the wealth of Egypt, and the many adventures through which Sarchedon had passed in his long journey from the tents of the Anakim to the mountain fastnesses of his own northern kingdom. He would inquire minutely concerning the evolutions and tactics of the Assyrian armies, the number of their chariots, the strength of their cavalry, the weapons of their men of war, and the proportion in which they made use of sling, bow, and spear; but he could not be brought to take any interest, apart from her warlike skill, in the character of Semiramis, paying little attention to the other's glowing description of her lavish state and luxurious magnificence, least of all caring to hear of her beauty, her attractions, the glory of her apparel, the lustre of her personal charms.

Even when Sarchedon poured his heart out freely on the subject of his beloved Ishtar, the Comely King listened, indeed, with a certain show of kindly interest, as due to the emotion of his friend, but obviously failed to appreciate the importance of the subject, or to comprehend the enthusiasm which could thus set up a pair of soft eyes and a fair face for the aim of a man's whole energies, the reward of his perils and his toils. He did not understand how a woman's smile could possess such attraction as the bray of a clarion, the flaunt of a banner, or the managed leap of a horse. Beautiful exceedingly, formed to be the delight of the other, as he was the admired of his own, sex, love to the Comely King seemed but a foolish riddle, not worth the trouble of solving, an irksome study interfering with the pleasures of the chase, unmanly, untoward,

but, above all, tedious and out of place when other affairs were on hand.

"Show me a woman," said he, smiling at his bow-bearer's rhapsodies, "with an eye like my falcon and a heart like my dog; so will I too drink myself drunk with this folly as with wine, to get sober again as surely, if not so soon. Till then, give me horse and hound, bow and spear. I tell you, Sarchedon, the whitest arm that was ever thrown round a man's neck could not yield me such a thrill of triumph and rapture as the lion's claw that tore me from loin to shoulder over my buckler while I stabbed him to the heart with my short sword, ere we carried him, you and I, up the mountain-side, and skinned his tawny carcass under the old oak-tree!"

Sarchedon sighed.

"I love the chase well," said he, "and warfare better, and Ishtar best of all."

"Warfare!" repeated Aryas, catching and kindling at the word like a war-horse at ring of steel; "talk to me of that till sun-down, if you will! Ay, war is something to live for, something to die for, something on which to wage sceptre and kingdom and all, if only the foe be worthy of the venture. Could I but see the sons of Ashur drawn out fairly before me in battle array, I would fall willingly in their midst, and hold my fame was crowned since I had lived to measure swords with the conquerors of the south. But what do I say? These are dreams and unreal visions. Too many ranges of impassable mountains, too many leagues of scorching desert, lie between the gaudy pinnacles of Babylon and my rude towers here in Ardesh. I have not power to go to him; and I think, with all his courage, all his lust of conquest, the fierce Assyrian dare not come to me!"

They had spent the morning since sunrise in the chase, and had been so successful as to regain the palace in Ardesh by noon. After a rough but plentiful repast, the king and his bow-bearer were sitting over the embers of a brazier, each with an untasted cup of wine beside him, conversing as above. Scores of warriors and retainers, shaggy, tall, athletic, clothed in furs and skins, crowded round a huge wood fire in the outer court under the open sky; for although the sun was fierce and powerful, a storm of sleet had lately swept across the heavens, and these hardy champions laughed while they wrung their beards to dash the frozen drops away. There was a shade of despondency on the young king's brow, and he shook his comely head, while he reflected on the remote

position of his kingdom, and suggested the impossibility of an Assyrian invasion.

Sarchedon started to his feet and listened.

"It is the tramp of a horse at speed," said he. "For good or for evil, there comes a messenger bringing tidings in hot haste to my lord the king."

Even while he spoke, a stir in the outer court denoted some unusual excitement, while the fire was deserted for the gate, where a crowd had already gathered round a travel-worn horseman, dismounting from his reeking beast, panting and jaded with fatigue. Sarchedon's face fell, and there was at least as much of self-reproach as of gratitude in his tone while he exclaimed—

"Cursed be my day, and oh that I had never been born! Something tells me I have brought evil to the hand that fed and the roof that sheltered me. I know too surely that the enemy is at the gate, that the sons of Ashur are bending their bows against the safety of my lord the king."

Aryas smiled, and his eyes glittered like a hawk's.

"Bring in the messenger," said he in calm sonorous accents; adding in a lower tone to his bow-bearer, "When, in return for fair words, costly gifts, and a dishonourable demand, I sent two arrows to the land of Shinar, the one a headless shaft, the other barbed and pointed, it was a token that Armenia, though desirous of peace, would never shrink from war. Had a dog sought my protection, he should have been safe behind a nation of horsemen. Shall I deliver up my friend at the whim of a proud lascivious woman, though she be twenty times a queen?"

"Alas," replied the other, "my lord knows not the might of Semiramis. She is immovable by pity, she is insensible to fear. All the hosts of heaven could not turn her purpose, nor thwart her desire. I will be the bearer of an embassy speaking words of peace from my lord the king. I will go back to put my neck under her foot, and abide my doom."

"Let her come and take you!" was the gallant answer. "By the sword we worship, she shall find the task a hard one!—ay, if for every bodkin she looses from her head-gear, she can set in array a hundred thousand men!"

The messenger, a rude and hardy horseman of the north, had now arrived in the king's presence. Prostrating himself but once, and with scanty ceremony, he stood erect to deliver his tidings in frank bluff tones.

"I have ridden night and day from the southern frontier," said he. "Thiras the governor sends greeting to the king.

He bids me tell him the south wind has brought up a flight of locusts, that darken heaven and cover earth with their swarms. Shall I speak yet further in the ears of the people who throng the gate?"

Aryas shot one glance of intelligence at Sarchedon.

"Say on," he exclaimed; "I have no secrets from those who sit at meat with me in the city, and stand beside me in the field."

Thus adjured, the messenger proceeded—

"The sons of Ashur have come up in their might from the land between the rivers. Their war-chariots shake the mountain as they pass, their horses drink the streams dry where they ride through. Thiras cannot count their numbers, and what could he do but offer earth and water for tribute, seeing that they muster under the banner of the Great Queen?"

Aryas started as if he were stung. The comely face flushed dark red, and rarely as he lost his self-command, some outburst of anger would surely have followed, but that another messenger arrived on the heels of his predecessor, if possible more hurried, more jaded, more travel-worn than the first. He, too, scarcely prostrated himself in the royal presence, and through the shaggy locks which fell across his brow his eyes shone with the terror of some wild forest creature hunted by the wolves.

"From Sambates, governor of Beznun," he stammered, "to the king greeting. They have cast a bank against Betlis, they have surrounded the great lake, and called it by the name of their queen. They have overrun the province, taking fenced cities, burning villages, laying waste corn-land and vineyard, slaying men, and carrying into captivity women and children. They are swifter than the south wind that brings them, fiercer than leopards, more terrible than the lightning, and numberless as the stars of heaven. What could Sambates do but offer earth and water for tribute, seeing that they muster under the banner of the Great Queen?"

Once again Aryas winced and coloured, but controlled himself the more effectually for the emergency of the situation. In the same instant he realised his peril, resolved to meet it, and calculated his powers of resistance. His first aim was to inspire his followers with confidence. Filling his scarcely tasted goblet to the brim, he advanced to the outer court, and standing in their midst, bade them follow his example, while he drank the national pledge—"To the Men of the Mountain and the Sons of the Naked Sword!" Then, taking his bow

from Sarchedon, he broke it across, and cast the fragments at his feet in token that war was declared, while he thus addressed them :—

"The wolves of the wood came up against the mountain-bull, and thought to slay him, saying, We are fierce and daring, my brothers, because we live on blood; and this creature cannot resist us, for his food cometh up under the dews of heaven, and he slakes his thirst in the murmuring stream of the hills. Also, we outnumber him a hundred to one. Therefore will we encircle him, and leap on him, and pull him down; so shall we fatten on his carcass, and drain the warm life-blood from his throat. Let us go up against him without fear, in an open space, rejoicing that he has been delivered unto us for a prey. But a herd of wild deer were feeding in the plain, and when the wolves approached they took to flight; so the mountain-bull, grazing far above them, raised his head, and was aware of his enemy crowding and circling towards him, like the waves of the Northern Sea. Then he withdrew into a thicket, where he set his back against the solid rock; and when the wolves made at him, fiercely, but one by one, they dashed themselves to pieces in vain against his shaggy front, writhing under his feet, falling pierced and mangled by his mighty horns. Men of the Mountain and Sons of the Naked Sword, is not Armenia strong and tameless as the wild bull of her hills? Are not the sons of Ashur innumerable and pitiless as the wolves that scour the forest, leaving only bones white and bare where they have passed? Ye have learned by these messengers that our country has been entered and our honour assailed. The banner of Assyria is flaunting in Armenian breezes, the sons of the Mighty Hunter are trooping in by thousands from the south, to slay and ravage and destroy. Therefore I call on you at my need, therefore I bid you to council; not to deliberate on a question of peace or war, for the bow is already broken and the sword unsheathed, but to advise with your king and leader how best we shall rid us of our enemy, and drive the wolf back, cowed, mangled, halting, and howling, to his den!"

Wilder, fiercer, louder with every peal, rose the shouts that greeted the Comely King's harangue, while he paused and looked about him, stately and graceful, like a master-stag at bay. Brawny arms were tossed, and naked swords brandished aloft in very ecstasy of warlike defiance, nor, of all those manly russet-bearded faces, was there one that failed to express intense hatred of the stranger, implicit trust and

confidence in the might of Armenia, with a fixed resolve to die, if need be, at worst, fighting hard to the very end.

When the council which Aryas had summoned took their places for deliberation, there seemed but one opinion—that, gathering all their forces without delay, they should pour down into the plain, like their own rivers in flood, and, overwhelming the foe in their onslaught, sweep him back to the place from whence he came. Who could stand before the hosts of the north? Were they not Men of the Mountain and Sons of the Naked Sword? It was the king's bow-bearer whose skill and experience tempered this bold resolve with a degree of caution, resulting from his own knowledge of the Assyrians' warlike resources. When it came to his turn to speak, though somewhat mistrusting his advice as an alien, none could gainsay the soundness of his argument, agreeing as it did with the half-expressed opinion of the Comely King. Insisting strenuously on the countless numbers of the enemy, and their overpowering strength in chariots and horsemen, he urged that it would be the height of imprudence to meet them in the open plain, where they would too surely be encircled and crushed by their enemy in a resistless girdle of steel.

"The wild bull," said he, "in the words of my lord the king, hath his rock, and the Men of the Mountain have their fastnesses. The wolves of the wood may dash themselves to pieces against the one, and the sons of Ashur spend their might in vain against the other. Let them advance here to meet us in the heart of Armenia, and so, falling on them weary, impoverished, and exhausted, let us fight a decisive battle under the very walls of Ardesh, and so destroy them, once for all, never to bend a bow nor lift a spear again."

After much discussion, the stranger's advice was allowed to be sound and good. It was resolved, therefore, that the Armenian forces should be concentrated in the very centre of the kingdom, there to await the attack of Semiramis with her innumerable hosts; and the same decision seeming also good when discussed, according to Armenian custom, over the wine-cup, every man went home to sharpen his sword and fit his bow-string for the coming fray.

CHAPTER XLVII

THE FENCED CITY

"THE storm has broke at last," said Aryas, stooping to lift a headless arrow that had fallen at his feet. "If it hail no deadlier missiles than this, there will be little glory in sheltering under buckler and headpiece, behind stone buttress and unbroken wall."

Sarchedon took the arrow from the king's hand.

"Behold," said he, "the feathers are dipped in blood. Such a token is the deadliest of all defiance from my countrymen. My lord the king hath ever measured glory by danger. Trust me, he will have enough of both who holds a fenced city against which the armies of Assyria come up to cast a bank."

"So be it," was the dauntless answer. "The god of our nation hath never failed us yet, and those can scarce refuse to accept the award of battle who worship no other power but that of the naked sword!"

They were standing on the wall of Ardesh, scanning anxiously the lines of the Assyrian camp, which now encircled them. The Comely King had here concentrated all his forces, and the hosts of Semiramis, disappointed, it may be, that they met so little resistance on their march, completely invested the capital of Armenia, where the men of the north had taken their stand, determined to put forth all their strength in a single blow, and finish the struggle once for all.

The Assyrians had surrounded the city by night. At dawn their trumpets sounded about it on all sides, and ere noon the siege had so far commenced, that the headless arrow, formerly despatched to the Great Queen as a token from Aryas, was shot into his stronghold, to alight at his very feet, wet and stained with blood.

"She is here in person," observed Sarchedon, in a low grave voice, while he turned the arrow round and round in his hand. "None of her servants would have dared to send such a messenger as this. It means war to the death, no ransom

for the captive, no mercy for the wounded, no burial for the slain."

"Is she, then, so pitiless a conqueror?" asked the Comely King, repressing certain hideous misgivings, that he had undertaken a task beyond his strength, and that not only his own life, which he was always willing enough to wage freely, but the safety of his people and the very existence of his kingdom were in the utmost peril.

"Merciless!" repeated Sarchedon. "An eagle has mercy when she turns from the dead carrion, a lion has mercy when he is gorged; but how shall men look for mercy from the solid impenetrable rock? That woman has, indeed, the lion's courage and the eagle's ken; but her heart is stone. And yet she is so beautiful,—so beautiful," he added, while a tide of wild and thrilling memories imparted a mournful tone to his revilings; "I have seen a poor wretch she has condemned turn on her his last look, full of love and worship, ere they covered his face and led him forth to die. Is she not more than woman? Is she not Ashtaroth, Queen of Light, come down to lead the sons of Ashur to their doom?"

The king was straining his eyes towards the camp of the enemy. He cared as little for the beauty of Ashtaroth as of Semiramis.

"If she is with her armies in person," said he, "and leads the attack, I will slay her with mine own hand. Behold, when I have cut the string, her captains and men of war shall bend the bow in vain. Look out yonder, Sarchedon, over the eastern slope. You know the array of your countrymen in camp or line of battle. Surely where the chariots of iron are massed, down yonder by the waterside, between the lines of horses, should be the abiding-place of the Great Queen."

From the rampart whereon they stood, a bluff face of rock descended precipitously towards the camp of the Assyrians. Such, indeed, was the defence of Ardesh on every side; the natural difficulties of the stronghold being enhanced by a solid wall of masonry, against which, even after a bank had been raised by the besiegers to the necessary height, their battering-rams might be plied for a considerable period without effect. Save on the eastern quarter, the fall was nearly perpendicular, affording no encouraging prospect to an attacking force; but here the cliff sloped off in an incline, up and down which a goat might travel freely, or an active man unencumbered with armour might pass to and fro. If Ardesh were to be carried by assault, this was its only practicable point, although the inequalities of the surface were so trifling, and the angle so

imperceptible, that the ascent looked perfectly smooth and upright from below.

Leaning over, with his attention riveted on the camp of the enemy, the king let his helmet fall from his head at this very spot. It rolled several cubits down the incline, till caught by a projecting corner of rock, where it hung bright and glittering, like a morning dewdrop on a dead autumn leaf. Aryas looked after it and laughed.

"Token for token," said he. "A headless helmet in answer to a headless shaft. If it ever gets down to their camp, they may summon their wise men to read the riddle in vain."

"It must not remain *there*!" answered Sarchedon. "The flash of steel will draw every eye in the host to the only joint in our harness; and I know their cunning of warfare well. Let my lord the king shelter for a space beneath the wall, lest I draw on him a storm from yonder dark cloud of archers in the vineyard when I show myself. We shall have no more headless arrows shot into Ardesh to-day."

"I would I had known in time!" muttered Aryas. "Not a leaf had been left on the vines to screen a marksman, not a hand's-breadth of green but had been scathed and shrivelled by fire within a bow-shot of the walls. Well climbed, Sarchedon! By the sword of my father, the Assyrian hath a leap and footfall like a goat!"

While he spoke, the royal bow-bearer crept cautiously down the precipice, taking advantage of every inequality that afforded foothold, of every tuft and fibre of vegetation that he could grasp. Slinging the recovered helmet round his neck with a bow-string, and thus leaving both hands at liberty for his ascent, he returned even less laboriously than he departed; and surmounting the wall, stood by the king's side, panting, breathless, but exulting with boyish glee in the achievement of his exploit.

"And they marked me not from below!" said he triumphantly; "though I dared not often trust myself to look down, I could have seen if bow had been bent or arrow pointed from the camp. Surely the Assyrian sleeps on his post; surely they have lost their discipline since I carried a spear in the guards of the Great King!"

"We will give them a lesson in warfare ere long," answered Aryas, but though his tone was bold enough, his eye wandered uneasily over the mighty array of tents and banners that covered the plain below. "We can hold them at our pleasure till the snow winds come to help us from the north, unless they give the assault at this very spot beneath our feet, and here,

too, we are guarded by the river, shallow though it be; for if to-day it steals smoothly and gladly through the water-flowers, like a youth wooing a maiden to the dance, to-morrow it comes roaring down in a seething flood, unbridled and irresistible as a host of northern horsemen with a broken enemy in their front."

But the king's prevision and the keen eyes of his bow-bearer were alike at fault. Thus it fell out that the only assailable point in the defences of Ardesh was laid open to an enemy who never failed to strike home without delay at the weakest place.

It had been the custom of the Great Queen, during their long and toilsome progress from the country between the rivers to the mountain regions of Armenia, to inspect with her own eyes the camp-life of her armies, and to satisfy herself of their nourishment, their comfort, their general efficiency, above all, their loyalty to her person and fidelity to the standard under which they marched. For this purpose she would assume the disguise of a simple archer, hiding her face, as if to screen it from the sun, with the folds of a linen head-dress, such as has always been affected by inhabitants of hot climates, and so, often without a single attendant, would stroll unrecognised through the camp, listening to the rude talk of the spearmen, and noting for future reproof any instances of negligence, tyranny, or misconduct that took place within her observation. Men wondered how an ill-yoked chariot, a trodden and turbid watering-place, an over-loaded camel, all came under notice of the Great Queen; so that the prevalent belief in her godlike birth and more than human attributes gained ground day by day from these examples of a knowledge that seemed at once ubiquitous and infallible.

No sooner had she disposed her forces, with all the skill her experience suggested, round the stronghold of her enemy than she determined to examine for herself the actual state of the wall which fortified it, even if she had to venture within bow-shot of the defenders. For this purpose she stole from her own magnificent pavilion in the attire of an Assyrian archer, and covering her face as usual, passed slowly through the lines where the flower of an army lay encamped, which, though sadly weakened by the toil and hardships of its protracted march, seemed yet formidable antagonists to any power on earth. The men were scattered about in groups, already making preparations, though noon was not long past, for their principal meal at sundown. Here a brawny warrior,

with arms bare to the shoulder and legs to the thigh, was shredding herbs in his headpiece, the homeliness of his occupation contrasting ludicrously with the warlike nature of his cooking vessel, as did the nudity of his extremities with the proven harness that kept his mighty chest. A comrade, lying on his back with arms folded over his face, kicked his legs in the air, while he watched the proceedings with a listlessness that denoted he was for evening duty, and would have no share in the result. A score of others, ungirt, unsandalled, half-armed, half-dressed, were gathered round a dying camel, vociferating many opposing remedies for the poor beast's treatment, while the roar of an irritated stallion, the peal of a trumpet, the stamp and snort of a row of feeding horses, mingled with the hum of voices rising from a circle of stalwart warriors sitting, though the sun beat fiercely down, round the embers of their camp-fire.

It was not in the nature of Semiramis to pass these magnificent specimens of manhood without notice. Half unconsciously she lingered in their vicinity, marking their ample beards, fine stature, and robust proportions, agreeing well with their deep full tones, while they discussed freely enough the chances of the expedition and the stirring events of their daily life, sparing not the captains of ten thousand, nor forbearing to criticise the great leader herself, who stood by and overheard.

"'Tis a strained bow they bid us bend, my brothers," observed a scarred, war-worn veteran, whose mien and bearing displayed all the fierce pride, the overweening self-confidence assumed by those who had served under the Great King; "a strained bow and a frayed cord—peradventure, a headless shaft to point, as well; but that makes little odds against solid masonry and bare rock. I doubt, if we are to get at the kernel of this date here over against us, we must crack the shell with our teeth."

"I can tell thee that mine are blunt for want of use," retorted a comrade, hammering busily at a broken link in his habergeon. "How are men to be fed on the march through a country that grows nothing but oaks and brushwood? There is grass, indeed, between the hills, and game for those who can hunt it in the woods, but of corn and cattle the valleys are bare as the palm of my hand."

"And empty as his belly," laughed a third. "He liketh well to have store of good things in both."

"But Semiramis forbade pillage," interposed his neighbour, grinning. "They took an auxiliary with a shield full of barley

that he snatched from an old man's threshing-floor, and she impaled him on the spot."

"Fool! that was in our own land of Shinar, before we crossed the frontier," said the first speaker. "The Great Queen never forbade pillage in an enemy's country till we marched into this wilderness, where there is nothing to take. Besides, the rogue slew the old man in his own vineyard, and he was only an auxiliary after all."

"And an ungainly wretch to boot, I will wager my share of supper presently out of that scanty pot," added a handsome young spearman, arranging his curly beard in the breastplate he had polished up to the brightness of a mirror for that purpose. "A comely youth of proper stature, be he captain or camel-driver, need never fear but he will find favour in the sight of the Great Queen."

His fellows laughed loud and long.

"Hear him!" shouted one, clapping the speaker on the back, "the favourite of Ashtaroth!"

"The dainty lotus-flower of the host!" exclaimed another; while a third, turning on him with mock gravity, bade him—

"Go to for a fool, who must be answered according to his folly."

"Dost thou verily believe," said he, "that because of thy bull's head and shoulders, thy foolish leer like a sheep in a sacrifice, and the perpetual grin of a southern ape eating a sour pomegranate, thou wilt get preferment at her hands, who knows a man when she sees one, and treats him like the arrows in her quiver? Lo! the bow is bent, the mark is struck or missed, another is fitted to the string; but the same shaft never comes into her royal service again. Though thy turn of duty takes thee daily to the great pavilion, I doubt if the queen hath ever seen thee yet."

"She shall hear of me, nevertheless," said the other, with a glance at the beleaguered town.

"Knocking that empty head of thine against the wall!" returned the veteran. "I tell ye, my brothers, that of all the wars yet undertaken by the sons of Ashur, this is the most untoward and ill-advised. What said the Great King when he turned back from the Zagros range, taking earth and water of the Men of the Mountain, but refraining to occupy their country? 'I would be lord of all below,' said he, pointing to those snow-whitened hills that mingle with the clouds, 'while I leave to my fathers the dominion of the sky!' He has gone to join them at last; but could he come back to us

this night, I tell ye by to-morrow's sunset we should be a day's march on our journey towards home!"

"Then why are we here now?" was asked by two or three voices at once.

The answer came in a grave important tone—

"Because of a treasure within those walls that Semiramis would wage life and empire, and you and me, and the whole might of Ashur to attain. What it is, I know not; if I knew, peradventure I dared not tell. But this I will uphold of the Great Queen, that her lightest wish is to the fixed resolve of another, as a man walking in armour to a maiden washing her feet in a stream."

His listeners nodded approval, and scanning the lofty towers above them, began hazarding many conjectures as to the nature of that possession so coveted by their queen. A strong opinion seemed to prevail that Ardesh contained some illimitable store of spoils hoarded by Armenian kings for ages; and this impression served partly to counteract their general feeling of despondency and disheartening belief in the impregnable strength of the place. The youngest of these men of war spoke the most hopefully.

"I will never admit," said he, "that the might of man can shut out the sons of Ashur under the banner of our Great Queen. A rock is steep. Go to! shall we not cast a bank against it? A wall is thick; shall we not undermine it from beneath? Give me a high curved shield to keep my head, a steel pick, and an iron crowbar; behold, I will sit like a partridge in the barley, and burrow like a coney amongst the rocks."

"So be it," answered the veteran moodily. "The sooner our trumpets sound to the assault the better. I tell thee, man, though the guards still show a goodly front, the hosts of Assyria are wasting and waning day by day, like that river in Egypt I passed over dry shod, like a flagon of Damascus wine, my brother, standing betwixt thee and me."

The archer turned thoughtfully away, walking through the lines with folded hands and head bent down in earnest consideration. There was food for reflection, even for anxiety and alarm, in the light talk of these careless spearmen. When they touched on her personal weaknesses, her predilection for stalwart warriors, and especially her indomitable strength of will, the queen could not forbear a smile; but it faded into an expression of deeper gravity than was often worn by that bright face, while she pondered on the cost and peril of this adventurous expedition, so wild in its object, so disastrous in

its results, confessing to her own heart that its impolicy was as obvious to her meanest followers as to their leader. Had not Assarac himself expressed the same opinion, almost in the same words?—Assarac, to whom she had never given a problem so hard but that he could solve it, a task so difficult, but that, for her sake, it was fulfilled. Her armies melting away daily, her men of war dispirited and ill-supplied, a strongly fortified city in front, a barren desert in rear! Not a captain of her host but would have quailed at the prospect, and had he been chief in command, would have commenced a fatal and disorderly retreat.

The character of Semiramis, however, was one on which danger and difficulty produced the effect of a hammer on glowing steel, welding and forging it, indeed, to the ends in view, but tempering it to an exceeding hardness and consistency the while. The desire of the present too, whatever it might be, became her master-passion for the time, and while sanguine and impetuous like a very woman, she possessed the courage, foresight, and obstinate perseverance of a man; also she enjoyed unlimited and irresponsible power as a queen; therefore it never entered her mind to abandon her task, or forego her intention of taking Sarchedon out of Ardesh by the strong hand, and marching the Comely King back to Babylon, a fettered captive at her chariot wheels.

"But to lie here inactive, waiting till he surrenders," thought the queen, "is like staring at ripe fruit in an orchard, till it drop down into the mouth. If a man hunger, let him climb the bough; I am but a woman, yet I think I can at least shake the tree."

So she resolved that, at all hazards and all loss, the place must be carried by assault without delay. Thus musing, she passed through the vineyard occupied by her own archers to within an arrow's flight of the beleaguered fortress, unnoticed by those who believed her to be a simple bowman like themselves, and so proceeded to scan the wall, with an eye trained to detect the slightest point of advantage at a glance.

It was strong, very strong. Here, perhaps, a bank might be cast against it to some purpose; but the besiegers would suffer fearful slaughter in the work. There, covered by their large wicker shields, and plying their mining-tools, her heavy-armed spearmen might sap the foundations of the wall; but could they climb, and fight, and work, all at once, where there was scarce foothold for a goat? It must be done, nevertheless; but how to do it? She taxed her memory and her invention in vain.

Accident, however, came to her aid, when all her warlike skill was insufficient. Gazing steadfastly on the place, she marked the king's helmet drop from the wall, and her heart leaped with triumph when she beheld his bow-bearer, who recovered it, reascending with little difficulty to return it to his lord—with triumph, and with a sharper, keener, sweeter sensation still; for in that bow-bearer she recognised him for whom she was thus willing to risk life and empire; while the same glance revealed to her at once the desire of her eyes, and the path by which it was to be attained. She felt her cheek burn and her pulses throb; but even in that glowing moment, the instincts of the commander dominated those of the woman, and her brain was never clearer, nor her eye more accurate, than while she measured the height of the steep, and noted every fall of ground, every inequality of surface, that could be turned to account in moving the strength of her army at this point to the attack.

Ashtaroth, she knew, would always be ready to do her bidding, but it needed prudence, self-restraint, and a steadfast heart to force Merodach to her will.

CHAPTER XLVIII

SONS OF THE SWORD

ON the brow of the Comely King lowered a cloud of anxiety and concern. He sat in the great stone hall of his rude palace, surrounded by chiefs and followers, to take counsel with them for the turning of this overwhelming tide, and foiling of the enemy at his gate.

Though, contrary to the custom of his nation, he rarely tasted wine himself, mighty flagons and capacious drinking-cups stood within each man's reach, so that while they pondered and stroked their beards, and shook their shaggy heads with ominous wisdom, many a deep draught was quaffed by these rugged heroes in silent pledge to the weapon they professed to worship, and of which they boasted themselves the offspring. In the middle of the hall, on a massive stone altar, springing as it were from a groundwork of ferns and mosses, stood a naked broadsword, pointing to the roof; and not Baal himself, thought Sarchedon, in his stately temple of Babylon, with countless victims, streams of blood, libations of wine, and all the pomp of his white-robed priests, could have boasted a more sincere devotion than was offered by these rugged champions to the warlike symbol of their faith.

His bow-bearer stood on the king's right hand. It did not escape him that, although treated by Aryas with marked confidence and consideration, angry brows were bent and suspicious glances levelled at him from many in the assembly, who seemed to take exception at this promotion of an alien to such a post, more especially at a time when the stranger's own countrymen were pressing them so hard. The haughty Assyrian winced and chafed under these symptoms of ill-will like a gallant steed, whose rider dare not trust his mettle, resolving that, ere long, some daring act of valour in the field should reinstate him in the good opinion of warriors, to whom success was a convincing proof of merit, and desperate courage the only test of worth. To rush fiercely against the

ranks of his own nation, hewing, sword in hand, at the very men with whom he had heretofore broken bread in the city and marched to conquest in the field, went indeed sorely against the grain; but Sarchedon reflected that, besides the ties of gratitude which bound him to Aryas the Beautiful, there were many reasons, hardly less weighty, for his desertion from the banner of Ashur, and abandonment of his service under the Great Queen. To become once more a mere toy and plaything at the caprice of Semiramis was a thought too humiliating to be endured, even could he escape the usual doom of those on whom she cast a favouring eye, while it was probable that she would at once take cruel vengeance for the vexation and disappointment of which he had been unwittingly the cause. So long as she remained mistress of the world, it was hopeless for him to think of honour and safety, above all, of Ishtar, liberty, and love. But if the Assyrian host could be defeated under the walls of Ardesh—if, baffled, scattered, and disorganised, they could be driven back on the rugged defiles and barren deserts that lay between them and their home—what was there to prevent an Armenian army from marching to the gates of Babylon? and how could Ishtar escape his search, who, at the conqueror's right hand, would scour the land of Shinar through its length and breadth, till he found the woman whom he had never ceased to love?

While such thoughts were teeming in his brain, he was not likely to endure with patience doubts of his fidelity to the cause he had espoused.

Many and opposite were the opinions of the warlike council. Saræus, a wealthy chieftain, arrayed with something more of luxury than his fellows, and lord of many a fertile valley beyond Mount Aragaz, as yet unoccupied and unheard of by the Assyrian, urged strenuously the prudence of standing a siege.

"We have fuel," said he, "we have shelter; casks of wine to broach, herds of beasts to slay. Let us eat, drink, and be merry, while the enemy perishes with hunger at our gates. The river runs between us, our walls are strong, our rocks are steep. Like the eagle on her eyrie, I would sit with folded wings and scream my defiance to the leopard prowling below."

"Scream till thou art hoarse!" exclaimed Thorgon, a giant from the northern desert, armed in chain harness and clad in undressed skins, "but remember, 'He who hath the gullet of Saræus, should have his larder to keep it full.'"

There was a general laugh at this application of a well-

known proverb, founded on the wealth and fertility of the last speaker's dominions, and the luxurious habits of their owner. Thorgon proceeded, much pleased with the effect of his unaccustomed eloquence—

"When thy father summoned me to council, O king, he never paused to take my vote on a question of peace or war. Aramus knew and trusted his old comrade well. 'Thorgon,' said he, 'is a steed always saddled, a bow always bent.' I am ready, as I have ever been, to lead my long-swords into the fore-front of battle. But let not the king deceive himself: we have an enemy down yonder in the plain accustomed to conquer, inured to danger, skilled in all the arts and artifices of war. This is no broad-leafed oak into which we must drive the old Armenian wedge, but a front of solid earth-fast rock!"

Men looked in each other's faces, discouraged and alarmed. It was something new to hear this fiery patriarch express doubts of victory. A hint of caution from Thorgon was tantamount to forebodings of defeat from milder spirits; and a short but ominous silence fell on the assembled council, while each realised the danger he had hitherto shrunk from acknowledging even to himself. It was broken by the king.

"There is a courage to endure," said he, "as there is a courage to assail. When the snow-winds come, they will rid us of our enemy, without bending of bow or shaking of spear. But our grapes are yet green in the vineyards, our barley scarce whitening on the plain. How many days, think you, my brothers, will meat and drink be forthcoming if we elect to remain up here, cooped within the walls of Ardesh like a swarm of bees in a hive?"

Again opinions varied; some thought they might hold out a hundred, some barely a score. Thorgon offered to break through the lines of the enemy, and bring in sheep and horses from the wind-swept plains of his home.

"When we have eaten the last down to their hoofs," growled the fierce warrior, "we can always run out, sword in hand, and take what we want from the tether ropes of this scolding housewife whom they call the Great Queen!"

"Sarchedon," said Aryas, turning to his bow-bearer, "you have held your peace too long. Give us your counsel, man; for you best know the strength and the designs of our enemy."

There was a stir in the hall at this appeal to the stranger, and more than one sword leaped a hand's-breadth from its scabbard. Murmurs of "Traitor, traitor!" rose by degrees to louder outcries. "Out with him!" "Down with him!"

"Slay him and cast him over the wall to his own people, who have come hither at his desire!" were the mildest of these revilings, while a scuffling of feet and crowding of shoulders about his place at the king's right hand denoted no good-will to the Assyrian, small chance of mercy or even justice if national prejudice and panic should get the upper hand. Aryas flushed dark red with anger; but Thorgon interposed his massive person between the bow-bearer and those who threatened him, while his deep hoarse voice cried "Shame!" in accents that might have been heard by the besiegers outside.

"A stranger, and treated thus in the king's council-chamber!" he shouted. "By the sword that begot our nation, I will stamp the life out of the first man who steps across the hall! What! the Assyrian came to our gates a captive and a suppliant, and shall we deliver him up, were he ten times a traitor, at the bidding of the loudest-tongued shrew that ever wore a smock? Nay, my brothers, stand back, I say; give every man a fair hearing, and room to swing a sword!"

Thus adjured, the assembly subsided into their places, and Sarchedon took advantage of restored order to protest earnestly against the suspicions of those with whom he had come to dwell.

"I am an Assyrian," said he, facing boldly round on such as had been most vehement in their outcries, "and I am proud of my birth as of my nation. But I was also a soldier of the Great King, who could never be urged to war within the confines of Armenia, and I owe no allegiance to her who has taken unlawful possession of his throne, who would establish herself thereon with tyranny and injustice. I came here a weary footsore slave; I was fed, comforted, and raised to honour by my lord the king. Every drop of my blood shall be poured out to do him service. Bethink ye too, Men of the Mountain, if the Assyrian takes me fighting in your ranks, he will strip the skin from my body to make sandals for his feet. Those strike fierce and hard who have no retreat; and if honour, good faith, gratitude, count for nothing, at least you may trust him for whom defeat is a cruel and shameful death. My lord the king hath demanded my counsel. To so noble an assembly it is not for me to offer advice, but I am enabled to give information. I have returned but a short space from the outer wall. Since day-break the enemy hath been busied in turning the course of the river, that he may advance to the assault dry shod. You

yourselves best know to what purpose you can defend the city from an attack on its weaker side; but my lord the king hath demanded counsel of his servant, and it is not for me to shrink from speaking because of angry threats and scowling brows. Were I King Aryas of Armenia, as I am his faithful bow-bearer, I would go down to battle with the Assyrian, and strive with him, man to man, outside the city walls!"

Loud shouts of applause greeted this daring speech, and Thorgon, striding across the hall, laid his broad hand on the Assyrian's shoulder, with a gesture of unqualified approval and respect. The enthusiasm became general, so that even Saræus shouted and gesticulated with the rest; but Aryas, stepping proudly into the midst, drew his sword from its sheath, and kissing its handle, raised its point towards the roof. Each man present followed his example, and thus, with naked weapons gleaming in their hands, they listened in silence to the words of the Comely King.

"It is well spoken!" said he. "Surely the bow-bearer hath shot his arrow home to the mark. If indeed the river be turned, steep rock and solid wall will avail us little against the huge engines and innumerable archers of the Assyrian. It is wise to attack when it seems hopeless to defend; and who shall stand against Armenia coming down in her might, like one of her own torrents from the snow-topped hills? I am a free king, ruling over a free people, yet can I count on you, my friends and followers, as on the steel in my own right hand. Let us set the battle in array, and fight the quarrel to the death. The stranger never turned from our father's gate in peace, nor entered it in war. Shall we forget whose sons we are to-day, because of a fierce people, riding on horses, worshipping strange gods, and mustering countless as the snowflakes in a storm? I call on you, as Aramus would have called on your fathers, to rally round his son; and I pledge you in that sacred cup to which, since Armenia became a nation, traitor or coward hath never dared to lay his lips!"

With these words, the king filled a mighty bowl with wine, and bringing the edge of his sword so briskly across his naked forearm that the blood spouted from the gash, suffered a few drops to drain into the liquid; then, raising the vessel to his lips, drank heartily ere he passed the bowl to Thorgon, who, following his example, sent it round amongst the rest, each man quaffing his share with the zeal and gravity of one who partakes in a religious rite. When at last the bowl reached Sarchedon, there was scarce a mouthful left; but the Assyrian,

catching the spirit of this strange ceremony, pierced his own arm without hesitation, and thus pledged his new comrades in a draught of blood. Any lingering suspicions they might have entertained were completely dissipated by so ready a compliance with their ancient custom, and not one but went out from the presence of his lord to prepare for battle with a confidence as implicit in the fidelity of the stranger as in his own.

With measured steps, lowered weapons, and a grave aspect, as having before them a task it would tax all their strength to accomplish, these Men of the Mountain departed one by one, each, as he left the hall, turning with grim salute to do obeisance to the Naked Sword. When the last had vanished, Sarchedon, looking into the face of his lord, felt his heart sink and his blood run cold ; for on the brow of the Comely King, though courageous and serene as ever, there was imprinted the seal of the destroyer—there seemed to sit that cloud, so awful and so mysterious, which is the shadow of coming death.

CHAPTER XLIX

FAITHFUL UNTO DEATH

"IT is our only course against such a foe," said Aryas, after a gloomy silence, during which lord and servant seemed to have been following out no cheering train of thought. "For any nation on earth to oppose thy countrymen in warfare is to wield a shepherd's staff against a blade of tempered steel. But one heavy blow from the club, well-aimed and unexpected, may sometimes shiver the deadlier weapon to its hilt. Our long-swords of the mountain bite sharp and true. The wedge of Armenia can pierce a column, however dense, and the gap widens as we fight on. Surely it will cleave the might of Assyria, as a woodman's axe cleaves the sturdy oak of the hills."

"But the oak is rooted to its place," objected Sarchedon, "while the Assyrian can wheel and stoop and strike like a falcon in the air. His horsemen will open out, and bend their bows till they have wrapped the advancing wedge in a storm of deadly hail—till its men fall thick, and its might is loosened from the rear. Then will Semiramis order up her war-chariots on either flank; and, once broken, as well he knows, there is no rallying for the long-swords of my lord the king."

"They shall *not* be broken," exclaimed Aryas. "With Thorgon to lead them on foot, with their king to direct the battle in his chariot, with thy skill of warfare, Sarchedon, and our own good cause, I commit the result to that power which hath ever befriended Armenia, in attack and in defence—the might of the Naked Sword. Yet I would we could fight them at a vantage, nevertheless," he added, his enthusiasm changing to deep anxiety and concern. "Their armour,

their weapons, their horses, are better than ours, and they outnumber us ten to one."

"True, O king!" replied Sarchedon; "therefore must we fall upon them unawares. Behold! In their ranks every spearman hath been taught to handle spade, every slinger uses the pick deftly as he whirls the thong, each third man carries a mattock or a shovel; and the Great Queen values their labour no dearer than their lives. This night one half her host will be employed to turn the course of the river that keeps your city on its eastern side. Let my lord the king summon his men of war in the hours of darkness, and at daybreak go down to battle. If he conquer, it will be with the first onslaught. If he fail, then may Sarchedon, his friend and servant, pay back the life he owes, and die at his lord's feet."

Again that ominous shadow passed over the king's face: he laid his hand kindly on the other's shoulder, and spoke in a low sad voice—

"Sarchedon," said he, "when I shielded thee from the demand of an Assyrian embassy, it was for jealousy of my father's honour — for the cause of the stranger and the oppressed. When I took thee out from under thy horse—ay, from off the very horns of the wild bull—it was for care of a faithful servant risking life at the pleasure of his lord. Now we are master and slave, crowned king and belted bow-bearer no more, but friends in esteem and affection, brothers in confidence and love. I tell thee that the days of Aryas, the son of Aramus, are numbered, and the Mountain Men must choose them another king to guide their counsels and lead their long-swords into battle. Last night I dreamed a dream; and it needs no wise man, no cunning soothsayer, to read the interpretation thereof. Behold, I was hunting in the mountain, riding to and fro with bow in hand and hound in leash, seeking to take a prey. In vain I traversed hill and valley, rock and river, stately forest and scattered copse—leaf, grass, and flower were alike scathed and blighted. It seemed that a flight of locusts had passed over all. Then I cursed the nakedness of the land in my wrath; and while thrice I shouted 'Barren, barren, barren!' mine own voice sounded hideous in mine ears. So I rode slowly on, and beneath my horse's feet I beheld three things that caused my blood to curdle and the hair of my flesh to stand on end. The first was a slain eagle pierced by a headless shaft; the second was a wild bull noosed in a woman's girdle; the third was a dead man lying on his face with the king's sandals on his feet, the

king's baldrick on his shoulders, and the king's quiver at his back. I tell thee, Sarchedon, the warning lies betwixt thee and me. Let us drink a cup of wine in fellowship to-night; for if we go down to battle with to-morrow's dawn, one of us shall have quenched his thirst for ever by noon of day."

"On my head may it fall!" exclaimed Sarchedon. "Let the slave perish, and let his lord, who raised him from the dust, ride forth to victory!"

"Nay, hear me," replied the king; "for I have already told thee lord and slave are no words between Aryas and Sarchedon. If I accept the vision for myself, I am willing to face its interpretation freely as I would face the horsemen of Assyria and the chariots of the Great Queen. I might die many a baser death than to fall in battle with Thorgon and his long-swords at my back. But if it is for thee that the dream has been sent, I tell thee, my faithful friend and comrade, I cannot bear to think that thy share in our joint venture should be all loss and no gain. When I took thee into my palace, rude and homely though it seem, I swore its halls should be a harness of proof and a tower of defence for the stranger who sought its shelter. When I gave thee a place in my heart, I resolved I would bring thee to promotion and honour—not to danger, defeat, and death. Go out from among us, Sarchedon, ere it be too late. Return, as of thine own free will, to the Assyrian, with fair words and costly gifts. Buy their favour and the safety of thy body with that fair province of the south that lies by the Glassy Lake. Behold, it is a gift from me to thee. Tell them that the open hand of Aryas is heavy as his clenched fist. Bid the Great Queen depart in peace; but if she must needs come to buffets, there is space enough to fight a kingly battle beneath the walls of Ardesh. If she desires to seize my father's crown, she must take it off my brows by force where I stand, in my war-chariot armed with bow and spear."

For all answer, Sarchedon stripped the quiver from his shoulders, took the sword from his thigh, and laid the weapons at his lord's feet.

"It is enough," said he. "If the king can believe his servant capable of thus ransoming one poor life at the cost of honour, I have served him already too long. There are many brave men among his subjects better fitted than Sarchedon for the highest post Armenia has to offer. Poor and naked as he came, let the Assyrian return to the station from which he was raised by the favour of my lord the king. Yet, if true service and a grateful heart may plead for him, even now

he will but ask to take his place to-morrow in the fore-front of battle, and, habited like a simple soldier of Aryas, march with the Men of the Mountain to his death."

The king's features worked with emotion.

"Not so," he exclaimed in hoarse and broken accents. "True and faithful servants I can number by scores, but such a heart as this cleaveth to a man, be he king or herdsman, once in a lifetime. Surely it sticketh faster than a brother. I have proved thee, Sarchedon, as one proves the harness that is to keep his life. I tell thee, we will go down to battle side by side; together we will bend the bow and point the javelin. Honour, danger, and triumph we will share alike; and when the end comes, as something warns me come it will, peradventure in death we shall not be divided."

Then he lifted belt and baldrick from the stones, and with his own hand fastened the quiver at Sarchedon's back, girt the sword on his thigh, thus reinstating the bow-bearer in all the honours he had voluntarily resigned. Standing side by side in this reversal of their relative positions, it chanced that the servant caught sight of his own figure and his master's reflected in the burnished surface of an empty wine-flagon over against them. Remarking, not for the first time, their extraordinary similarity of form and features, Sarchedon now ventured on a request that only the high favour in which he stood, and the humility of his tone while proffering it, could have rendered palatable to his listener.

"Let not the king be wroth with his servant," said he, hesitating, like one who tries a plank with his foot ere he commits to it the whole of his weight, "if he ask yet another proof, in addition to all the honours heaped on him, of the trust in which he is held by his lord. Behold, like the sand that sucks the desert spring, he thirsteth yet for more! Let the king grant him the desire of his heart, and live for ever!"

"Say on, man!" replied Aryas, somewhat impatiently; "surely there needs not all this ceremony between thee and me. By to-morrow's sunset," he added, in a lower, sadder tone, "the same wild dog may be scaring the vultures from us both."

"Then, if we are to meet our death together," replied Sarchedon, "let it be in the same habit and the same armour. This is the boon I earnestly beg of my lord to grant. Men have said, ere now, that armed and in the field there is some such resemblance between Sarchedon and him who is called Aryas the Beautiful, as between the illusive verdure of the desert and those groves and waters that it represents. Let

me take upon me then to array myself in such attire and harness as are worn by my lord the king; so, in the press of battle, the advantage of his presence and conduct shall be double, while the risk from his enemies—for my people strike ever at the head—will be but half."

Aryas pondered.

"And if I fall," said he, "wilt thou bring on the Men of the Mountain like a free Armenian king, leading the long-swords to the charge again and again, even unto death?"

"I will do my best," replied the other; "for, indeed, whither am I to retreat? and what will be my fate if I am made a captive? Surely I have nothing to fear but defeat. If the long-swords will follow, I ask no better than to lead them through the ranks of Assyria—to the very chariot of the Great Queen!"

The king's eyes blazed with unwonted fire.

"Swear it!" he exclaimed vehemently.

"I swear it by the everlasting wings!" answered Sarchedon; and so they made their compact with death.

CHAPTER L

A FOOL IN HIS FOLLY

IT is not to be supposed that the warlike skill which assisted Ninus to form his plans, and the courage which rivalled his own in carrying them out, would fail Semiramis now that she was unfettered by the counsels and commands of her lord. The sons of Ashur had never yet been led so judiciously, organised so carefully, as in this daring expedition to the north, under conduct of the Great Queen. Aryas little knew with whom he had to deal, when he spoke of surprising her by sudden onslaught, or hoped to rout her in the fury of his attack. Her watchmen were posted, her defences prepared, her dispositions made to meet his wiliest stratagems; and all the time, while every working-party was covered by a guard of twice its number, the labour progressed steadily, and the river, on which the besieged chiefly depended for security, waned cubit by cubit and hour by hour.

None knew better than this woman-warrior how the presence of a commander infuses spirit into the operations of an army, how the ubiquity of a leader promotes that attention to details which alone ensures success: there was no period of the day or night but the queen's white horse might be seen flitting through the lines of her innumerable host, while the lovely face smiled its calm approval, or expressed displeasure, no less fatal because so grave and quiet; always pale, immovable, and serene, under gleam of moonlight, flash of torches, or glare of day. Men wondered when she ate and slept, inclining to believe that this supernatural beauty must be above such human wants, tended and nourished by the stars from whence it came.

Only Assarac perhaps, in all that host, knew too well that the Great Queen's passions and affections were of earth, earthly; that the flame which scorched her heart and blazed in her eyes was no enlightening radiance, but a devouring fire to wither and consume—knew too well, yet loved her all the

more ; for the eunuch's whole being was now saturated with a sentiment noble in its origin, disastrous in its results, that yet springs from the fairest and sweetest instincts of man's nature, as poison may be distilled from flowers. It caused him to labour and watch, to endure hunger, thirst, heat, and fatigue. It bade him forget pride, ambition, self-respect. It made him a warrior, a hero, and a slave. It rendered him brave, pitiful, generous, and unhappy.

Twice since sundown had the queen ridden out through the camp, with Assarac at her rein. Once more she was astir an hour before daybreak, yet, as she mounted at the entrance of her pavilion, the eunuch stood there in waiting to help her to the saddle, and attend her in her ride. Without a word she galloped through the lines, at such speed as the dubious light permitted amongst the numerous obstacles of a camp, nor drew bridle till she reached a spot by the river, where certain masses of shadows looming against the sky denoted that the walls of Ardesh would be visible with dawn of day. Here she halted and broke silence.

" A city of defence," said she with a gentle laugh, " like a blade, or a pitcher, or a woman, or anything else you please, is no stronger than its weakest place. On this side alone is Ardesh not impregnable. I have made thee a warrior, Assarac, as a girl spins her hank out of a tangle of flax, with the patient heart and the gentle hand. Show me thou hast profited by my lessons, and tell me why I brought thee here at a gallop before dawn."

Brightening as he always did with the sound of her voice, Assarac answered, reasonably enough, " To scan the place warily as soon as it is light ; to learn every bush and stone, count every blade of grass on the ground where we mean to give the assault."

" Not so," she answered, in the same light tone. " All that was done in this poor head of mine when first I marked the spot. No ; the warrior-eunuch has yet much to learn from the warrior-queen. It is not enough to set your own host in array, and mark your own plan of battle ; you must also fight for your enemy, put yourself in his place, and so, anticipating him in every plan he can devise, force him at last to accept the contest when and where you choose to offer it. The reason women always foil men is, that they *cannot* put themselves in our places, nor foresee what we may or may not do in the plainest situation. But this concerns neither thee nor me. I think I have even less of the woman than thou, Assarac, of the man."

He answered not a word, moving uneasily in his saddle, as if from a sudden hurt.

"Nay," she added, guessing his discomposure from his silence; "I meant we are both above the weaknesses of our fellows—kindred spirits treading down all obstacles in our path, knowing no law but our own will and our own desires. Listen, then, thou priest of Baal in harness of proof—listen, and learn while I teach thee that which shall be of more service to-day than all the lore aching neck and dazzled eyes ever yet gathered from the stars. Is not this the weak side of the fortress, and therefore the better for our assault?"

Aryas must know it also," replied the eunuch, "and will have mustered here his chief power of defence. Peradventure we might surprise him, with less loss, on a stronger quarter."

"An apt scholar," replied the queen, "and worthy to be a captain of ten thousand; nevertheless, in so far at fault that he sees not with the eyes of his enemy. Behold! The Armenian, hopeless of defending his city from such a host as mine in the process of a regular siege, and seeing the river in which he trusted turning to dry ground beneath his eyes, will determine to hazard a battle here on this narrow strip where he can fight at a vantage, while half the attacking army is engaged with pickaxe and spade. Listen, priest. I hear the tinkle of their tools even now, borne on the light breeze that steals in advance of day. He little guesses the work was all completed by the middle watch of night; that every company is bending, armed, over a feigned task in order of battle; that, at the first note of a trumpet from the queen's pavilion, be it dark or daylight or grey uncertain dawn, the hosts of Assyria will set themselves in array without hesitation or confusion, every bow bent, every horse mounted, every man in his place. Since my tent was pitched yonder by the stream, I have not found a moment till now to breathe the cool night air and loose the buckle of my belt. Is it not grand and joyous, this pause before the storm? At such a moment I feel how noble it is to lead the sons of Ashur to battle. To-night, Assarac, I *know* that I am the Great Queen!"

She seldom thus divulged her own thoughts, her own sentiments. The tones of that voice, always so bewitching, thrilled to his heart's core; and with irrepressible admiration he burst out, "Queen of the sons of Ashur! Queen of the whole earth! Were there indeed crowns of fire above, queen of the host of heaven! What have I to offer in earnest of such devotion as never worshipper yielded to his god? It is little enough to give this poor brain in council, this poor body

in battle; but oh that I could take the heart out of my breast now, this moment, and lay it down before thee there, to trample beneath thy feet!"

"It is too much," she answered, almost in a whisper. "I may tread warriors in the dust, but I make no footstool of a servant's heart, be he man of war, eunuch, or priest of Baal. Keep it in thy harness, good friend, and see that to-day it turn not to water in the face of the Comely King."

Dawn was still below the mountain, and he could not read her countenance; but on his ear, sharpened by intense emotion, there jarred a something in her voice that broke its full melodious ring. Was it kindness? Was it pity? Maddening thought! was it the insult of covert mirth?

"I am not like others," said he. "I know it too well; and yet my adoration of my queen is less the blind man's yearning for the day he hath never seen than that desire of the spirit for some star it must not hope to attain, which yet raises it, by the very agony of its despair, towards the light for which it longs."

She had a brief space of leisure before the joyous revelry of battle would commence. There was no better pastime, she thought, at hand. Why not examine into so strange a phase of human suffering, and learn how much the heart, even of such a man as this, could be made to bear, before it maddened him past all endurance? Surely such studies, so curious in themselves, enhanced the flavour of that pursuit she dignified with the name of love; a pursuit far inferior, no doubt, to war, equal though, and perhaps in very hot weather preferable, to the chase. Here a memory of Sarchedon came to disturb her equanimity; but so much of bitterness and vexation mingled with the thought, that her heart grew all the harder for its indulgence. What had she to do with pity, she who had slain beasts by scores and men by hundreds to pass an idle day? Had she ever wished her shaft recalled when it pierced the lion through from shoulder to shoulder; and were these human creatures half so brave, so noble as the brutes? Was she not the Great Queen, answerable to none on earth, and fearless of the very stars in heaven? Besides, it amused — more, it interested—her. So she, the conqueror of the world, thought no shame to trifle with him as a village maid trifles with her peasant lover, as a cat trifles with its paltry little prey.

"There is a light," she said, reverting gently to his wild confession of idolatry, "that blinds a man's eyes, besides burning his fingers. It is not that by which he sees his way clearly to safety or success."

"And of what avail are safety and success to *me*?" demanded Assarac, striving in the early twilight to read his doom on that remorseless face. "Success, the prize of him who hopes; safety, the desire of him who fears. If I am below hope, surely I am also above fear. My queen, look on that shadowy mass of wall and tower, darkening every moment against the coming light of dawn. How many bold warriors, think you, are within that city who to-day will draw the sword and throw away the scabbard once for all? I too have drawn the sword and rushed upon my fate. Like one who leaps into air from the tower of Belus, I cannot recall my plunge. Great Queen, I have dared to love the very dust beneath your feet. Here, in the day of battle, I dare to tell you so. Ere set of sun, Semiramis shall be ruler over all the world, from the warm river of Egypt to the bleak snow-deserts of the north; or Assarac shall be down in the strife of horsemen, trodden out of all likeness to humanity. Enough! I can but serve her at the end as I have served her from the beginning; and for wages I do but ask, great glorious queen, look kindly on me ere I die!"

His voice came hoarse and broken, his smooth face worked convulsively from chin to eyebrows. Surely any other woman must have been moved—at least to compassion; but Semiramis, pulling her horse's head up from the wet morning herbage he was cropping with avidity, gazed intently on the walls of Ardesh, now visible in the light of dawn. Was not the great stake for which she played enclosed within those towers, the desire of her eyes, the treasure of her wilful heart? She could understand, she thought, those longings on which the eunuch laid such stress, but of pity, save for her own sufferings, she had none to spare.

"Listen!" exclaimed the queen, turning round on her companion with one hand held in air, as though she had not heard a syllable of his appeal, "they are mustering even now within the place. Stand still, Merodach! Good horse, the ring of steel stirs thee like thy mistress! What say you, Assarac—can we creep on a bow-shot nearer to make sure? The light is behind them, and we may defy their archers for a few moments yet."

Thus speaking, she moved her horse forward a score of paces, followed by the priest, vexed, smarting, dizzy with anger and shame. But his tortures were not over, his punishment not yet complete. Sitting calmly on her horse, though day was breaking fast, and every instant brought nearer the certainty of a storm of arrows from the wall, Semiramis

looked round with a careless smile, like some light-minded dame chattering with her tirewoman.

"What think you, Assarac?" she whispered. "Is he waking yet, this Comely King?—of whose beauty they make such a prate you would suppose he was Shamash, god of day. I would fain see him rise from his couch; for I like well to look on beauty, both of man and beast."

Then she patted Merodach on his swelling neck, sighing and smiling too while she caressed her favourite: the sigh was for memory, the smile for triumph and for hope.

"We shall rouse him to some purpose," answered the eunuch, mastering his emotion bravely. "And the Great Queen shall judge of his beauty for herself, naked and a prisoner, bound at her chariot-wheels."

He spoke firmly, even gaily, as behoved one who had made up his mind for the worst. That day, he resolved, should see the end of all this doubt, and longing, and misery. In the front of battle he would perform such deeds of valour as should force the queen's regard for him, the eunuch, who could thus put to shame her stoutest men of war, or in the ranks of the long-swords he would find out the great secret, and start for yonder place, wherever it might be, that Ninus and Sargon, and so many others, had reached long ago.

Semiramis caught up her rein with an exclamation of delight.

"I was sure of it!" she said; "I knew it from the first! They will fight in the plain—they are moving the host down even now. Behold, I can see their archers on the wall! It is time for you and me, Assarac, to prove the mettle of our horses and the surety of their archers' aim."

As she spoke, she urged Merodach to a gallop, while an arrow whistling by her cheek quivered in the ground a spear's-length farther on. The good horse only sped the faster, and ere morning had brightened the mountain's crest, Semiramis reached her pavilion, and her trumpets rang gaily out, to set the sons of Ashur in array.

CHAPTER LI

BOW AND SPEAR

IT was a goodly sight, could the queen have waited to behold it, that downward march of the Armenian host to meet their enemy in the plain. The flower and pride of all the north, formidable in size, number, and length of weapons, they deployed, squadron by squadron, and company by company, under cover of their archers on the wall, till they found space near the river's empty bed to form that wedge, or solid triangle, in which it was their custom to offer battle. This mass consisted of spearmen, who with levelled points and raised bucklers seemed to present but an impervious hedge of steel to the efforts of an adversary. It was designed to penetrate and cleave asunder by sheer weight and pressure the opposing force, while Thorgon and his long-swords, mounted on their swift hardy horses, held themselves in readiness to cut up and destroy in detail the fragments of an enemy thus riven the wider the more it gave ground to its assailants. Such a method of fighting was considered by the mountain men to ensure victory; and the queen's eye sparkled, her cheek glowed, when she beheld the hosts of Aryas the Beautiful thus eager to engage her own on a system of which she had mastered all the details, prepared to worst it at every point.

"The lion is astir," she said, "and walking deliberately into the toils without an effort at escape. By the light of Ashtaroth, I will have his claws pared, his fangs drawn, and the beast as tame as a kitten, before close of day!"

Splendidly armed, ablaze with gold and jewels that flashed in the morning sun, she stood in her chariot, looking like the goddess by whom she swore, her beautiful face radiant with pleasure, her heart beating high with courage, triumph, and the wild tumult of unbridled love. Her shield-bearer's place still remained vacant, and save a youth to drive her horses, she was alone in the chariot; for Assarac, who remained as usual in attendance, occupied another at her side.

The eunuch's face was very grave and sad; its fleshy outlines had fallen, the eyes were sunk and haggard, while about the lips care and sorrow had carved those anxious lines that age itself fails to imprint when the heart remains at ease. He looked little like a priest of Baal, less like a warrior of Ashur: but never prophet burned with fiercer fire, never were nerves of champion strung to more desperate courage, than glowed in the vexed heart and wounded spirit of Assarac the eunuch, thus waiting on Semiramis the queen. He had galloped back with her to the camp before sunrise, and at the first trumpet-call ascended into his chariot, that he might aid her with his counsel, perhaps shield her with his body in the press of battle.

In the disposal of her power she had shown her accustomed skill. Dark masses of horsemen gathered like clouds on either flank. Her spearmen, in a solid column, occupied the centre, protecting a bristling array of war-chariots, ready to be launched against the enemy so soon as he advanced into the plain; while forming her own guard and a reserve to be hurled, as it were, at the critical moment on any point she should select, rode a picked body of warriors clothed in blue, shining with gilded armour, and chosen from the flower of her men of war by the queen herself.

Aryas the Beautiful, surveying from his chariot the line of battle thus opposed to him, felt, while his courage rose with its very hopelessness, a sad conviction of the impossibility of his task. He whispered as much to Sarchedon, who accompanied him.

"Behold," said he, "how the wolves are gathering to hem in the mountain-bull on every side. I knew not they were so many, nor so fierce. Surely he is a daring leader who joins battle with the sons of Ashur."

The other, while acknowledging so obvious a truth, could not repress a thrill of exultation in the fair and formidable array of warriors with whom he had heretofore gone out to victory.

At the same moment Semiramis turned to Assarac, whose chariot now stood by her own, and pointed with a radiant smile to those long lines of steel glittering in the morning sun.

"The blade is out," said she, "and balances so well in my hand, I can smite when and where I will. Who would care to be a queen, but that the arm which sways a sceptre has such strength to draw a sword? Behold, the very auxiliaries stand fast, as if they too felt they carried on their spears the honour of Assyria!"

"Trust not their patience too far," urged the eunuch. "Great Queen, they are clamouring to engage even now!"

"Fools," she returned gaily, "I mean to sacrifice them soon enough. But I can scarce trust them in the first shock of the assault, or I would leave our own people to come in and reap the victory."

"Let not the Great Queen scorn the words of her servant," replied Assarac, "humble man of peace though he be. The children of Anak, led by their woman-captain, claim the advance as their right. Behold, they are fierce champions, tall as palms, greedy as beasts of prey, acknowledging no law save the customs of their tribe. How shall these be satisfied when the fight is over, the victory gained, and the spoil divided? Grant them their wish: let them hurl themselves against the enemy. If they loosen his formation, it is well; if they turn back in confusion while he smites them hip and thigh, it is better. Assyria can do without them in the day of triumph as in the day of battle."

The queen scanned him from head to foot.

"Do you think I cannot rein a steed," she asked, with a scornful laugh, "because it is strong and wilful, or rule a handful of horsemen because they stand a span higher than their fellows? Go to, Assarac; I thought you knew me better. I have a task in store for these same Anakim, and I purpose leading them myself. They shall help me to take this Comely King captive from the very midst of his host. I tell you, I mean to look at his beautiful face before sunset, as close as I am to you!"

"May the queen live for ever!" was his reply, for Assarac's whole attention seemed now engrossed by the strength of Armenia advancing to the attack.

The wedge came on, solid and impenetrable as if it were indeed a living mass of metal. Thus it crossed the level ground by the river's bed, directing its point steadily for the centre of the Assyrian line; and so long as it moved upon an even surface, nothing could be more warlike than the mechanical regularity of its advance—nothing, perhaps, save the discipline of the Assyrian archers, whom the queen kept so perfectly in hand, that in spite of a tempting proximity to the Armenians, not a man moved in his saddle, turned his rein or bent his bow. But when the huge triangular phalanx reached the channel, now dried up indeed, yet rough with broken banks, sandy ledges, shingle, and boulders of rock, a shiver seemed to pass over it like that which ripples the hide of some huge monster in its death-pang, and Aryas

drove furiously down in his chariot to rectify the disorder ere it was too late.

In compliance with his bow-bearer's entreaties, the attire and harness of the Comely King, though less simple than usual, were such as might be worn by any captain or leader of his host. There was nothing about him to identify his royalty but the handsome form and face. Sarchedon also was armed and dressed in a precisely similar manner, so that at the interval of a spear-length it was impossible to distinguish one from the other. The bow-bearer too had divested himself of the quiver that denoted his office, and while he stood upright, and brandished a spear in the war-chariot, Aryas covered him with a shield. Even old Thorgon, riding up to his lord for final orders, rubbed his eyes and pulled his shaggy beard in angry confusion at its success, while he admitted the wisdom of this stratagem.

With voice and gesture, Aryas and Sarchedon strove in concert to restore that dense consistency to the mass which constituted its strength and safety; but eyes as quick, and skill more practised, were watching their opportunity, so that as the leading Armenian spearman made his first false step, the arm of Semiramis went up, a trumpet sounded, and the horsemen of Assyria set themselves in motion by thousands, with bows bent and arrows drawn to the head. There is a moment, and none knew it better than the Great Queen, on which the tide of battle turns.

"In the toils *now*!" she murmured viciously, "and that fair head of yours will be at my mercy to-night, as sure as I hold this bow in my hand. Assarac," she continued, in the calm ringing accents with which it was her wont to issue her commands in battle, "let them feed that force of archers thousands by thousands, as they want them, from the columns on their flanks. When the Armenian host arrives at yonder white stone, bring up the reserve of spearmen, and I will attack with the whole line."

Ere this landmark could be reached, she was well aware that the advancing phalanx, stumbling at every step, galled on all sides by mounted bowmen, who, circling swiftly round, wrapped it in a deadly storm of arrows, must become so loosened and disorganised as with one well-supported charge to be broken up and cut to pieces in detail. Already darting an upward glance at the towers of Ardesh, she was doubting whether to occupy it with a strong Assyrian garrison or to burn its palace, and level its defences to the ground. For a space all went as she desired. Wheeling in clouds, succeeded

and relieved by squadron after squadron, each fresher, fiercer, more daring than the last, it seemed to Aryas that the horsemen of Assyria were inexhaustible and intangible as the locusts of their own fertile land. With each discharge of arrows, his phalanx hesitated, tottered, and opened out. It was no longer a solid wedge, but an irregular mass, melting and crumbling like a snow-wreath in the southern breeze. There was not a moment to lose, and the Comely King, whose habits of woodcraft had at least gifted him with that promptitude of decision which is so necessary in war, saw the crisis and prepared to meet it.

"Sarchedon," he exclaimed, "leap on my horse, the bay standing there behind the chariot! Ride down to Thorgon like the wind. Bid him bring up his long-swords steadily, but without delay. At the first step taken by the enemy's spearmen, he must charge and drive them back amongst their chariots. It is the last chance left. Away! Two Armenian kings are fighting side by side this morning; Sarchedon, if at set of sun there is but one left, my faithful friend and servant, fare thee well!"

Touching his lord's hand reverently with his lips, the bow-bearer flung himself into the saddle, and galloped off at speed; while Aryas, snatching them from his charioteer, shook reins and whip and flew towards that white stone which the keen eye of Semiramis had already marked as the turning-point of conflict.

When they parted, scarce a bow-shot intervened between the king's chariot and the handful of Anakim who were drawn up in the position they had clamoured to occupy, waiting with fiery impatience an order to begin. Their queen sat motionless at their head, her face concealed as usual, her eyes intently scanning those hostile ranks in search of the man she loved. Suddenly she dropped the rein and clasped her hands upon her heart. Surely that was his figure yonder, riding, as he alone could ride, along the river bank! A dead archer lay in his path, and the bay horse, swerving wildly aside, brought his rider round with a swing that showed his front to the enemy.

"Sarchedon, Sarchedon!" she cried in a stifled voice, then stretched her arms out piteously, and, gasping for breath, flung the veil back from her face.

It was the signal they had expected since daybreak, the gesture by which they were taught to believe their enemies would be consumed like thorns crackling in a fire. The wild blood of the desert would take no denial now; and with a

shout that rang round the towers of Ardesh, reins were loosed, spears lowered, while, sweeping their bewildered leader onward in their centre, the children of Anak carried all before them in a desperate and irresistible charge.

The brow of Semiramis turned black for very anger, while the beautiful features were distorted with a spasm of rage and scorn.

"The fools!" she hissed between her teeth. "If but one comes out of the press alive, I will impale him in the centre of the camp! And for their leader—if she be wise, she will die on those Armenian spears, rather than answer this mad frolic in the face of the Great Queen!"

The next moment, with smooth calm smile and royal dignity, she beckoned Assarac to her chariot, and gave her directions in that calm assured tone which with Semiramis denoted a crisis of extreme peril, and perfect confidence in her own powers to meet it.

What she anticipated did indeed come to pass. The common saying, "Who shall stand before the children of Anak?" had doubtless grown into a proverb because of its undisputed truth. Individually, the champions of Armenia went down before these stalwart horsemen like corn under the sickle. Iron buckler made no better stand than wicker shield against their mad thrusts and crashing strokes, linked harness proved no stronger fence than linen gown, and bearded men of war seemed but as puny infants contending with this gigantic foe. Charging against the head of the Armenian phalanx, they drove its leaders back upon their fellows; and while they hewed and shouted and smote without remorse, the little band reared about them a barrier of ghastly mutilated corpses, rising to their very girths. But while thus pressing sore against the front of their enemy, they condensed him into his original formation; and the Great Queen, always intolerant of shortcomings in discipline, had the mortification to witness her well-digested plan destroyed, her whole order of battle put to confusion, by this untoward advance of a force she intended reserving to the last moment for a purpose of her own.

"And ten more spear-lengths would have sufficed," said she, veiling her vexation as best she might. "Behold, Assarac! In war, as in peace, it is better to trust a haltered ass than an unbridled steed!"

CHAPTER LII

LOST AND WON

SARCHEDON, galloping furiously on his mission, yet cast more than one glance over his shoulder at the battle raging behind him. He too marked the overwhelming charge of the Anakim, and its effect on that solid mass against which its might was hurled. Trained in the subtlest school of war, by the great captain of the age, he perceived at once that if ever they were to be routed, now was the critical moment at which the discomfiture of his countrymen must be achieved. The bay horse reeked with foam and reeled from want of breath when it reached Thorgon's side; and Sarchedon, deeming not an instant should be lost, ventured so far to extend the command he had received as to urge on that old warrior the necessity of putting his men in motion at a gallop. Thorgon frowned and bit his lip.

"Go to!" said he. "I am not to be taught by an Assyrian youth how to set the battle in array. Nevertheless, if thou wilt share in a death-ride to-day with the children of the north, pull that knife of thine out of thy girdle and come with me."

Thus speaking, he drew his own long heavy sword, and waving it round his head, placed himself in front of his horsemen, and led them against the enemy at a rapid pace, which, when within a bow-shot distance, he increased to their utmost speed.

The Anakim had now penetrated so far into the ranks of the Armenians as to be nearly surrounded, while victorious, by the very foe they were engaged in defeating. It needed but this charge of Thorgon and his grim long-swords in their rear to complete the circle that hemmed them in. Semiramis, from her chariot, marked the crisis and the manner in which it must be met.

"Assarac," said she, in her calm modulated voice, "I cannot trust the children of the desert. They would not retire if I bade them, and so weaken the wedge by drawing it

after them in pursuit. We must check these wild cattle of the mountain, nevertheless. Bring up my spears in solid column of a thousand men in front, masking the chariots. When I raise my bow, let them open out and every driver urge his horses to a gallop. I will not give the signal till I see my opportunity, so watch me like a falcon over a fawn. Send for my horsemen clothed in blue. Ten squadrons may serve to bring the Anakim out of peril, and with the rest I will myself make a dash for the person of this Beautiful King."

Her commands were implicitly obeyed. With a shout that denoted their courage and unshaken confidence, the chief strength of the Assyrian army advanced steadily to the attack.

Meantime the Anakim were fighting at considerable disadvantage. Hemmed in by falling foes, encumbered by dead of their own slaying, they had no space to turn their horses, scarce elbow-room to swing their swords. Twice had Ishtar's rein been seized by a dismounted enemy, and her horse dragged down to its knees; twice had his veiled queen been rescued by some tall champion, who pierced her assailant to the heart, or clove him to the chin. But, nevertheless, the farther these desperate giants fought their way towards the centre of the Armenians, the more difficult became the task of extrication, the more hopeless their chances of retreat. It seemed that all was indeed lost when Thorgon and his long-swords came pouring down upon their rear.

To Ishtar the events passing before her eyes were but as the horrors of some ghastly dream. Faint, gasping, terrified, stunned with the din, choked in the dust, blinded by the flash of weapons, sickening at the smell of blood, she was only sensible she had seen Sarchedon, as in a vision, and had cried to him for assistance in vain. Helpless and bewildered, she must have been slain a score of times but for the chief of the Anakim, whose weapon kept her assailants at bay, while his hand guided her horse through the press of battle; but even this protection failed her when that formidable champion found himself engaged with Thorgon hand to hand.

Wary and experienced, hardened and toughened by continual toil in warfare and the chase, the old Armenian knew every wile of the swordsman, every turn of the horseman, familiarly as he knew the spring of a panther or the rush of a mountain-bull. But he was no match for the larger frame and lengthier limbs of an opponent who was a younger, stronger, and quicker man, riding a better horse. While he

waved his long sword round his head to cleave his adversary to the girdle, the other smote him sharp and true below the fifth rib, and, with a loud curse on the only god he acknowledged — the weapon that had failed him — Thorgon fell headlong from his saddle, dead before he reached the ground.

Men, horses, flashing weapons, reeling banners—all swam before Ishtar's eyes; and, swaying blindly forward, she was scarcely conscious that a protecting arm supported her, a careful hand guided her bridle towards the outskirts of the fight.

The fall of their leader seemed in no way to discourage the mountain men; rather they fought with greater fierceness and obstinacy than before. The children of Anak too, considerably outnumbered, and disheartened by the helplessness of their Veiled Queen, began to give way, striking furiously about them indeed, without a thought of flight, yet obviously bent on effecting a retreat, if possible in good order, but at any sacrifice a retreat.

In this imminent crisis of battle, the Comely King and the Great Queen were moved simultaneously with a conviction that now was the moment at which to throw all the weight attainable into the scale. If either side could be driven back but a score of spear-lengths, it might be made to give ground imperceptibly, till wavering grew to flight, and flight culminated in defeat. For Armenia, it seemed the only hope to push forward the wedge till it penetrated and divided the queen's solid columns of spearmen; for the sons of Ashur the sure path to victory lay in a breaking up of that dense obstinate mass, already weakened and mutilated, while its nucleus should be annihilated by their chariots, and its component parts cut to pieces by their horsemen hovering on its flanks. Therefore Aryas, standing erect in his chariot, encouraged his men of war, with voice and gesture, in the very fore-front of battle. Therefore Semiramis, scanning with undisguised approval the ranks of her bodyguard clothed in blue, placed herself joyfully at their head. The Armenian monarch had resolved to save crown, kingdom, and friend, or die, like a true mountain man, in his war-harness; while the Great Queen, thirsting for victory as the drunkard thirsts for wine, was urged by her longing after Sarchedon and the spur of a feminine desire to behold Aryas the Beautiful face to face.

They were now scarce ten spear-lengths apart, on the dried-up river's brink. The ground was rough and broken, the wheels of her chariot drove heavily, and Semiramis found

herself more than once in danger of being thrown from her elevated position between the horses that plunged and laboured over slippery rock or yielding sand.

Against the carved and inlaid panel beside her hung a quiver with its single arrow—one of those sent to Babylon in return for her embassy, and which she had sworn by Nisroch to plant in the breast of Aryas the Beautiful with her own hand. She snatched it from its case, made a sign to the attendant who led him, leaped on Merodach, and, looking proudly round, raised her bow aloft to brandish it over her head. Then, while spears went down and bridles shook, a shout rose from the warriors in blue raiment that was caught up by the whole Assyrian army, and every man called lustily on Baal, swearing a mighty oath that he would fight to the death for the Great Queen.

Aiming, as was her custom, at the heart of the enemy, Semiramis broke furiously through the opposing long-swords, now deprived of their leader, with the view of first extricating the Anakim from their perilous position, and afterwards directing all her force against the Armenian king in person.

Assarac too had done his part like a practised warrior. The deep array of spears, a solid column many furlongs in length, strong in its front of a thousand marching men, was nearing the conflict every moment, with that smooth and even step, that mechanical regularity of approach, which seems the very impersonation of discipline and power. Concealed behind its masses, betrayed only by an unceasing jar of iron and roll of wheels, came on those formidable war-chariots, so irresistible by an enemy who had sustained a check that caused the slightest confusion in its ranks; and wielding the whole array, governing at once each element of the storm, drove Assarac the eunuch—he of the cool brain, the steadfast courage, the pitiless heart, who could be moved but by one sentiment on earth—his mad infatuation for the queen.

Aryas marked it all, and knew that now the end was very near. Glancing towards Sarchedon, he beheld his bow-bearer, scarce ten spear-lengths off, in the hottest of the struggle, defending, as it seemed, from stroke and thrust some object at his side. The Anakim gathered about him; while the long-swords, shouting "Aryas! Aryas!" were making desperate efforts to approach, believing, no doubt, they were rallying round their king.

Semiramis neared her object with every stride. Aryas had stooped to take another arrow from his quiver, and, as he raised his head again to confront his enemy, looking

Looking proudly round raised her bow aloft

boldly over his shield, behold! for the first time, he stood face to face with the Great Queen.

Deceived by the likeness, duped by her own wild heart and reckless longing, she called on him she loved by the name she had learned to whisper in her dreams; but the hoarse shriek that cried "Sarchedon, Sarchedon!" was so different from the full soft tones in which she was used to doom a culprit or direct a battle, that her guards pressed fiercely in, thinking their leader must have been stricken with a death-hurt.

Casting down horse and rider in the fury of her career, she urged Merodach towards the chariot, every consideration of war and policy, all care for herself, her army, her people, lost in a fierce thrill of triumph that the desire of her eyes had not escaped her, and she had found him even at the last.

Surrounded by the chosen horsemen of Assyria, overmatched, out-numbered, and now at his sorest need, Aryas shouted to his bow-bearer for help; and Sarchedon, still struggling in the strife as a swimmer fights and reels amongst the breakers, answered lustily to the call.

The Great Queen, making, as she believed, for another, was now within ten paces of Aryas the Beautiful himself.

In that hideous din of battle she neither heard his cry nor the voice that replied to it; but the white horse with the eyes of fire had a truer memory and a sharper ear. Recognising his master's accents, he swerved aside to reach him, but meeting the wrench of the queen's practised hand on his bridle, reared high with tossing head, and plunging blindly forward against the king's chariot, struck himself and his rider heavily to the ground. As the good horse rolled over a maimed Armenian, the dying mountain man shortened the sword he grasped fiercely even then, and buried it in the animal's bowels.

Agile as a panther, Semiramis extricated herself, and was up like lightning; but when she saw the beast she prized so dearly dead at her very feet, her heart burned, and her eyes blazed with a fury wilder, fiercer, madder, than the rage of any beast of prey. Baffled, stunned, bewildered, she only knew that Merodach lay slain beneath her; that an armed enemy stood above with shielded face and javelin raised to strike; that here across the body of her horse was the turning-point of battle, and that she held a bow and arrow in her hand. Unconsciously, she fitted the one to the string, and drew the other at a venture, as it were, in self-defence.

It was the Armenian arrow, cut in Armenian forests, tipped with Armenian steel. It had travelled to Babylon and back as a symbol of dignified remonstrance and royal self-respect; now the white cruel arm impelled it straight and true, to find its home in the heart of an Armenian king. Stricken below the buckler, he felt his life-blood oozing down to wet its feathers, drop by drop.

"Turn thy hand out of the battle," murmured Aryas to his charioteer, "since I am hurt even unto death!"

But he never spoke again; for the Great Queen's men of war, making in to aid their leader, hurled him from his chariot, gashing with pitiless sword-strokes the comely face so fair even in death, crushing under trampling hoofs the stately form that, maimed, bruised, and mangled, was grand and kingly still.

So the horsemen of Assyria triumphed; her spears made victory secure, her chariots rolled over the slain. The blue mantles smote and spared not; the Anakim extricating themselves, not without considerable loss, departed in good order; and the pursuit rolled on till the sons of Ashur sacked the town of Ardesh — to burn, pillage, and destroy, even unto the going down of the day.

But men looked in vain for her who had led the attack and achieved the victory, asking each other with eager looks and anxious faces—

"What tidings of the Great Queen?"

Her armour lay, piece by piece, beside her; there was dust on her lustrous hair, the pride of her royal garment was rent from hem to hem, while bowed down in anguish, with fixed eyes, white face, and rigid lips, she knelt beside a dead horse, over the body of a dead king.

CHAPTER LIII

SHARING THE SPOIL

IN the palace of Ardesh, where the naked sword stood for men to worship, they set up a golden image of Baal; where a free monarch sat amongst his free warriors, the servant of a despotic mistress now lorded it over a conquered race. Between rise and set of sun a king had perished, an army had been cut to pieces, and a warlike people ceased to hold its place among nations.

In the court of that royal dwelling, under the soft evening sky, Assarac stood in state to receive the captains of the host, take note of their prisoners, and count the spoil. He had borne him all day like a warrior of might—cool as the wariest of leaders, bold as the fiercest of spearmen. None the less was his practised eye scanning the material results of triumph, his active brain plotting to consolidate the fruits of victory.

Though himself unwounded, the eunuch's harness was riven and dented, the linen garment, which, in right of his priestly office, he affected even in battle, was streaked and spotted with blood. Fed by the fire within, his look was keen and piercing; there seemed little more trace of fatigue on his careworn face than it had worn day and night since the host marched out from the northern gate of Babylon; and, conscious he had borne him like a true son of Ashur, under the eyes of the Great Queen, his aspect, lately so dejected and morose, was brightened by a passing gleam, as from the light of hope.

It looked a ghastly task on which his mind was bent. Files of Assyrian spearmen, passing proudly before him, laid down the heads of enemies slain in arms or taken prisoners after the combat; so lavishly and with such precision, that a pile of these hideous trophies had already

risen to the height of a man's girdle. Two scribes, tablet in hand, took note of their exact number; while Assarac, as the queen's chief counsellor, recorded the names of the successful warriors, and apportioned the share to which each would be entitled in dividing the spoil. Not a murmur rose against his award; for it was still fresh in men's minds how at the turning-point of battle, when victory hung doubtful in the balance, all that fierce energy and daring which had rendered Ninus such a successful leader seemed to have descended on the priest of Baal whom the old king so mistrusted and reviled.

Man by man the champions of the Assyrian host passed by. One laden with the spoil he had already gathered, rude in workmanship, yet precious in its barbaric splendour and intrinsic worth. Another, dragging some hapless foeman, whom he had bound securely with his girdle, and whose fate hung on the eunuch's nod; for the conqueror, with bared arm and naked steel, held himself ready to pierce, flay, or decapitate at the lightest sign. A third, leading a comely mountain maid, white and ruddy, with shy blue eyes and tangled locks of gold, scared, trembling, weeping, yet sometimes blushing, not without conscious triumph, that she had herself taken captive the strong fighter in whose power she seemed to be.

For the vanquished, Assarac now showed a clemency unusual in the traditions of his people, not entirely in accordance with his own nature, as it had hitherto appeared, hard, practical, uninfluenced by feeling, and looking only to results. It was observed that he spared all captives save only such warriors as had been taken fighting against the bodyguards of the Great Queen; while for the Armenian women, in this their hour of sorrow, he manifested a pity and consideration that elicited certain ribald comments from his countrymen, and no small surprise from the prisoners themselves. But censure, praise, and ridicule were alike unable to affect him to-day. With that power of concentration which constitutes the principal element of success in war, government, or indeed any business of life, his energies were engrossed in the important task of so disposing that great Assyrian army, as to provide for security and good order in the captured town. Leader after leader therefore he summoned and dismissed, receiving their tale of spoil and captives, giving directions for the distribution of their men.

"Where has he learned his skill of warfare," said the old captains to each other, "this high-priest of our Assyrian

god? Surely Baal comes down to him by night and speaks with him face to face."

So strongly was national pride and self-confidence imbued with a religious belief in their gods, that this opinion seemed to the sons of Ashur extremely probable and well-conceived. It reflected honour on themselves, their worship, and their triumph; above all, it invested Assarac with an influence and authority most essential in the absence of the Great Queen. Not a line of the eunuch's face, not a turn of his body, was permitted to weaken this impression of superhuman strength and sagacity, of holiness fresh from the fount of fire itself. Calm, dignified, imperious, moved by no casualty, equal to all occasions, he issued his commands with a foresight and wisdom that elicited order from the very excesses of a victorious army in a city taken by assault; and yet at Assarac's heart, though stifled and suppressed by the strong will within, raged a tumult far more difficult to deal with in its unbridled folly than the wildest license of warriors drunk with wine and blood.

Where was the queen? Again and again had that question presented itself in the hour of victory, and now, though the stars were out, he could not answer it yet.

While driving the Armenians back upon the town of Ardesh, and entering their capital with a routed enemy, he never doubted but that Semiramis was performing her part of the battle, and that they would meet at sunset in the Comely King's palace, where he would receive from her some acknowledgment of the valour he had shown, some word of thanks for the service he had done. For a time the exigencies of such a success left him not a moment to make inquiries concerning the mistress of nations, even had it been prudent to do so. It was necessary to assume supreme authority, and wield it without scruple; but when a clear head, an undisputed will, and an unequalled organisation had disposed of their immediate necessities, and the Assyrian host with its captives was securely established for the night, Assarac's anxiety became maddening as hour by hour passed on, but brought no tidings of the Great Queen.

It never entered his head that she could be slain. To him, Ashtaroth was no more an impersonation of light, beauty, and unearthly power than Semiramis. That she might have been taken up at the moment of victory, to join the stars of heaven in a chariot of fire, he was perhaps the only man of all the host who did *not* believe; but none the less was it impossible for him to realise that imperial

glory as shadowed by defeat, that matchless face as pale and fixed in death. Thus was he spared more than one hideous pang; yet perhaps it is a question whether the suspense that racked him now, with all its maddening possibilities, was not fiercer torture than would have been the certainty that she was gone from him for ever, and he must grovel before his idol no more.

While the stars shone coldly down on the scene of conflict, while a new moon shed her gentle light on fire-scathed tower and blackened wall above—on writhing sufferer and stiffened corpse below—on riven harness, prostrate horses, chariots broken where they fell—on the tents of the conquerors, the lines of the vanquished, the wounded, the sleeping, the dying, and the great banner of Ashur drooping sullenly over all,—Assarac wrapped himself in a dark-coloured mantle, and leaving the royal palace of Ardesh, stole down to the plain below, hoping that on the field of battle, where he had last seen her, he might recover some traces of the queen. Already, ere he proceeded half a bow-shot, he had disturbed a jackal at its loathsome feast. The eunuch shuddered and hurried on. Was this, then, the end and climax of all the pomp of war, the glory of the host, the thunder of chariots, the shouting of captains, the sword, the shield, and the battle? A nation rising in its might at sunrise, going forth to conquer, and at nightfall—lo, a wild dog mumbling a bone!

His pursuits, his profession, the juggleries that deceived the people, the pseudo-science that professed to read the stars, had taught him, perhaps, to ponder and reflect, where others of his nation were content to act and to enjoy. Looking from the scene of carnage at his feet to that summer's night so fair and pure above, the great question thrust itself upon his mind, which his experience, his reason, all the traditions of Ashur, all the mystic lore of Baal, seemed unable to answer. What was this confusion on earth, this order and regularity in heaven, and why were these things so? Did Nisroch take thought for that Armenian woman, wailing in the darkness over the body of her dead lord, or Baal pity the maimed swordsman yonder, trailing his length like a crushed reptile towards the stream that, in his agony of thirst, he forgot had been drained and turned aside? Was there indeed a motive power to govern in heaven? And if so, did it leave the evils of earth to right themselves as best they might, by force, fraud, and subtlety, the strong arm and the cunning brain? A thrill of triumph passed through him, while he murmured—

"It must be so! Let him lord it up yonder who will, man is the god below; and he who never flinches from his purpose shall not fail in his desire. Such a one stands here to-night in these my garments. Conqueror of the north, Assarac the eunuch has to-day taken his place among the mighty ones of earth, and who shall say him nay? Hath he not led the hosts of Assyria to victory? Hath he not adjudged to each triumphant man of war the meed of his deserts; and shall not he also take his share of the spoil? Costly jewels, treasures of gold, herds of camels, horses, armour, and cunning needlework—the common needs of common men—he careth for none of these; and yet to-night, surely to-night, shall he garner the harvest that has been sown in fire and reaped in blood. Ashtaroth, Ashtaroth, queen of love and light, hast thou ever known a worshipper who flung before thee all he had to give, taking his heart out, to lay it at thy feet, and asked only in return for one approving glance, one soft and kindly smile? Surely she to whom I pray cannot withhold these from me in such a time as this! Surely there is a goodly meed in store for him who has to-day placed her crowning victory on the brows of the Great Queen!"

He had nearly reached the river's bed, where the battle had been hottest, where the carnage lay thick and reeking in broad swathes of slaughter; a few more steps brought him to where Merodach lay stiff and cold, with a vulture feasting on his eyes, and a wild dog tearing at his flank. The bright stars and the young moon afforded light enough to distinguish the dead white horse with its ghastly attendants. Assarac's brain reeled, his blood ran cold, while he remembered that he had last seen its rider charging furiously through the battle, on the back of her favourite.

The vulture croaked and flapped its wings, the wild dog growled, glared, and slunk away. Like a man chained in a nightmare, half conscious that he is dreaming, yet wholly unable to resist the petrifying spell, Assarac felt as if some unseen power compelled him to remain and confront the nameless horror that he so dreaded, yet was so resolved to disbelieve. He tried to shout, but his tongue clave to the roof of his mouth; to draw his sword, but his hand hung powerless, and his flesh crept, so that the very hair rose in the nape of his neck; for gliding through the gloom, scarce half a bow-shot off, there passed him a ghostly procession, such as the spirits of the dead might form, in their land of shadows beyond the grave. Four tall dark figures, moving with solemn gait, bore aloft, on one of the long wicker shields used

by assailants of a fenced city, such a shrouded burden as denoted the presence of death under the cloak that veiled its ghastly truth. Behind them, with drooping head, clasped hands, and a bearing that betrayed the utmost abandonment of woe, walked a female mourner, majestic even in the hour of sorrow that bowed her to the earth. Assarac started into life now, if indeed that could be called life which was but restoration to consciousness under the smart of a deadly stab; for in the folds hanging about the corpse he recognised a royal mantle—in the drooping and dejected mourner, beheld the person of the Great Queen.

With fixed and rigid face, with hands clasped tight, with steps that seemed borne up and guided by some extraneous power, independent of and even dominating his own will, the eunuch followed through the darkness, as a sleep-walker follows the immaterial object of his dreams, never decreasing the space that intervened, never turning aside from the foot-prints of those who led, passing without heed over mailed corpse and broken chariot, through sand and shingle and shallow pools of blood. So the procession laboured gravely on, away from the battlefield, across the vineyards, up the rocky path that led to those mountain forests in which the dead king of Armenia might have found safety from his foes. The bearers neither increased their speed nor halted, nor stinted for lack of breath, but moved calmly forward with even measured pace, symbol of a haughty reverence and respect, rather than of pity or distress; for he whom they bore feet foremost had been a warrior like themselves, and lay warlike in his riven harness, with a broken bow in his hand. He had fallen, as was meet for a stout champion, in the fore-front of battle, and though the horsemen of Assyria slashed it cruelly with their swords, his comely face had never turned one hair's-breadth from the foe. Therefore the sons of Ashur thought no shame to carry him sternly and proudly to his rest, at the command of their mistress; therefore in their hearts they told themselves, how at Nisroch's appointed time, it would be well for them too that they should die in their armour, and that their last end should be like his.

The frogs clamoured in the marsh, the night wind moaned in the pines, filmy clouds swept over the crescent moon, and the corpse went ever upward into the mountain, while the queen followed after it, weeping, mute, unconscious, and Assarac, giddy and bewildered, followed blindly after the queen.

CHAPTER LIV

COUNTING THE COST

EVER as their path grew steeper, and they penetrated farther into its recesses, the forest became more gloomy, while its trees assumed more hideous and fantastic shapes. The sky was dark and wild, the air loaded with those murmurs of the night that are to sounds of waking life as passing shadows to real objects of flesh and blood; gigantic faces, grim, grey, and indistinct, blinked and peered from naked crag or gnarled and wrinkled trunk; while here, there, everywhere around, brooded a presence, no less awful because so vague and impalpable, that would have curdled and chilled the boldest human heart. It seemed to Assarac he was treading the border-land between here and hereafter; that at every step he might come face to face with some departed spirit, for which the universal experience was no longer a problem to be solved, which could tell him the secret all his life had been but an effort to inquire.

A white owl flitted noiselessly through the darkness, and the eunuch's heart stood still with something less debasing, yet far more horrible than fear. Nevertheless, as the shadowy train moved before him, mechanically he followed on. In a gorge of the mountain, where night was blackest, a red light glowed suddenly across the sky. Wheeling round the stem of a rugged oak, the bearers halted with their burden, in an open space where four glades met, converging on an indistinct mass, that seemed, in the fitful glare, some rough rude altar reared of unhewn stones.

Reverently they laid the dead hero down. Rising erect, when he touched the earth, Assarac recognised in their lofty frames and costly armour four spearmen from the body-guard of the Great Queen. Semiramis stood apart, peering eagerly into the gloom, only the outline of a white face visible in the deep folds of a mantle that shrouded her head and figure.

Wild yells and piercing shrieks rose from the forest, while

the flash of many torches danced fitfully among the trees. A score of hideous figures now came leaping into the open space, and formed themselves in a circle round the queen, the spearmen, and the dead warrior laid upon his shield.

Interest and curiosity had somewhat mastered the eunuch's over-powering sense of horror, so that, waking, as it were, from the oppression of a trance, he seemed to resume his faculties of body and mind. He knew the shapes at last, recognising them for those frantic votaries who, electing to worship Abitur of the Mountains, disowned all human ties and interests, abjured all other creeds and professions, that they might serve the great principle of evil in the wilderness. These men were naked to the waist, their hair and beards were matted and tangled in foul disorder, they tossed their lean arms aloft with frantic vehemence, and their eyes glared in the torchlight with the fierce cunning of insanity. They might have been themselves the demons they adored, so strange and unearthly was their appearance, while dancing, gibbering, howling, they came and went, now opening out, now closing in, their circle, now retiring among the trees, now advancing towards the altar, but still, like vultures about a carrion, converging gradually round the corpse.

The queen held up her hand; immediately the torches gave a steadier light, the wavering shapes were still, and prostrated themselves before her with mute signs of submission, reverence, even abject fear. She had protected the sect, respected their tenets, even joined in their worship, from motives of policy long ago. Now, in her great need, she clung to this desperate resource, and had come to wring from Abitur of the Mountains that which the host of heaven seemed unable to bestow.

With the increased light afforded by a score of torches, no longer whirled and brandished in the air, Assarac observed that, in the rock over against him, was hewn an entrance to some vast cavernous temple, ornamented with rough symbols and grotesque representations of the demon worshipped within. This cavity seemed partly natural, partly hollowed out from the bowels of the earth, by the same rude labour that had erected the altar in its front.

Four of the wild men raised the burden recently laid down by the Assyrian warriors, and, preceded by two of their companions with torches, disappeared in the entrance of the temple or mouth of the cavern. While they lifted the corpse, Semiramis passed her hand, with a gesture of exceeding tenderness, over the dead face, and followed close behind,

succeeded by the rest of the torch-bearing troop, leaving the spearmen without, as if to guard the threshold. An irresistible impulse drove the eunuch onward in his strange adventure, yet it seemed that he could not have uttered a word to save his life. With every faculty strained, every sense painfully sharpened, speech was alone denied him.

The sons of Ashur crossed their spears to bar his entrance; but throwing the cloak back from his face, though still without a word, he caused them to recognise him that stood at the right hand of the Great Queen, and thus passed unimpeded into the temple of the fiend.

In a vaulted cavern, so lofty that the glare of twenty torches scarce illumined the shadowy masses of its roof, stood four unhewn blocks of granite, supporting, at the height of a man's knee a rough slab of the same, on a flooring of rock, over which nature had spread a deep covering of sand. There was here no appearance of shrine or altar, none of those attempts at ornament, by which even the rudest of worshippers do honour to their deity with hand and brain. The walls of this natural temple were of bare bulging stone, its roof was reared far into the bowels of the mountain; it had but one aperture, through which a dim thread of light might be seen at noonday, and where, if he ever did visit them, the worshippers of Abitur were taught to expect the appearance of their master. Buried in the depths of the forest, beneath those wild shaggy hills, this dwelling of the evil principle was as dark and shadowy compared with the temple of Baal, as that shrine of the Assyrian god, glowing in vermilion and gold, seemed poor and paltry to the starry dome above, of which it professed to be the type.

From behind a jutting boulder of rock, forming, as it were, a natural buttress of the cavern, Assarac watched in horror. The dew stood on his brow, damp and chill as the slime on the surface against which he leaned. Semiramis snatched a torch from one of the wild figures at her side, and with its unlighted end described a triangular figure, while keeping herself carefully within that mystic border, around the broad flat stone on which the dead man lay. A wild unreasoning terror then seemed to take possession of the worshippers, they trembled from head to foot, and cowered back as far as the limits of the cavern would allow. In the silence that succeeded this movement, even Assarac expected some tangible horror to appear. The Great Queen planted her torch firmly in the sand at the corpse's head, stripping off at the same time its enshrouding mantle, while her own cloak

fell from her shoulders in the act, revealing at one stroke her matchless beauty and the glittering splendour of her attire.

It was a ghastly contrast—the same wavering light that played on the queen's jewels imparted a flicker of life and motion to the dead man's face, gashed and seamed with the sword, drawn and distorted with spasms of mortal pain. He seemed to gasp, to gibber, to be about to speak, as if the longing eyes that looked down on him were indeed able to draw his very soul back from those unknown regions to which it had taken flight, as if the force of a woman's will, the desire of a woman's love, must needs have power to bridge the gulf that parts the living and the dead.

Was it indeed Sarchedon who lay there disfigured into so maimed and unsightly an object? And did she love him so dearly, that now to-night, in the very hour of her triumph, she could forego her royal pomp and glory, could stoop her neck and bend her pride for such a thing as this? Then Assarac felt at his heart that keen and searching stab to which every other pain is but as a dull outward bruise to a serpent's venomed sting. With dropped jaw, fixed eyes, and rigid limbs, he watched like a man turned to stone.

She plucked an amulet from her neck, gazing on it for an instant ere she laid it softly, tenderly, in the dead man's breast. Then she looked upward, moving lips and hands, like one who pleads hard for life, though not a sound came forth. This was the second time she had bartered away her mystic charm. Surely all her resources of peace and war must stand her in some stead! Surely the dove and the arrow would not fail her now! When she turned her eyes again to the body, they gleamed with the light of hope. On her face was the smile that welcomes some dear one's home-coming, and she stretched her arms, as if to invite the wanderer back to her loving heart. But while still he moved not, lying there stark and rigid, without word or sign, it seemed strange to Assarac, that the Great Queen, whose nature was so imperious, manifested neither anger nor impatience at this protracted opposition to her will. Sorrow indeed came down over the beautiful face like a veil; but through it there shone the exceeding tenderness of a love that owns no limit of time or place, that acknowledges no barrier, even in the chasm of an open grave.

Once more her lips and eyes moved wildly, once more she looked around, as if to plead for that fiendish help she had come here to implore; then while her bosom heaved, and her

throat swelled high, she burst into a strain of melody that rang through the remotest corners of the cavern, causing the wild men's senses to thrill with a strange intoxicating delight, and the eunuch's heart to quiver with a fierce intolerable pain. It was the incantation by which, in sight of all the gods of her people, she protested against her loss, calling on the parted spirit to return from its place beyond the grave.

Laying her right hand on the dead man's forehead, her left upon his heart, she raised her head and sang—

"By the power of the Seven
Great tokens of light;
By the Judges of Heaven,
The watchers of night;
By the might of those forces
That govern on high,
The Stars in their courses,
The hosts of the sky;
By Ashur, grim pagan,
Our father in mail;
By Nebo and Dagon,
By Nisroch and Baal;
By pale Ishtar, contrasting
With red Merodach,
By the wings everlasting,
I summon thee back!

From the ranks of a legion
That files through the gloom
Of a shadowy region
Disclosed by the tomb;
From the gulf of black sorrow,
Of silence and sleep,
Where a night with no morrow
Broods over the deep;
By desire unavailing,
And pleasure that's fled;
By the living bewailing
Her love for the dead;
By the wish that endears thee,
The kisses that burn,
And the passion that sears thee,
I bid thee return!

Thou art cold, and thy face is
So waxen at rest,
In my fiery embraces
Seek warmth on my breast.
Through the lips that caress thee
Draw balm in my breath,
And the arms that compress thee
Shall wrench thee from Death.
Though he boasteth to spare not
For ransom or fee,
Yet he shall not, he dare not,
Take tribute of me.

Then if love can restore thee,
Though bound on the track,
From the journey before thee,
Beloved, come back!"

While the last syllables died on her lips in long pathetic tones, she sank across the dead body, brow to brow, breast to breast, and mouth to mouth. Surely, if but one spark of life had been left, that wild embrace must have drawn and kindled it into flame.

But Assarac's brain reeled, and the cavern swam before his eyes. Staggering, suffocated, he hastened from the place, passing the men of war at the entrance as he rushed blindly out into the darkness. Said one spearman to his comrade, "Surely it is a spirit. Behold how it vanisheth in the night!" To which the other, leaning thoughtfully on his shield, replied—

"It is the demon who hath entered, and taken possession of the man, and driven him forth, and fled with him into the wilderness."

CHAPTER LV

THE VOICE OF THE CHARMER

IT was not the custom of an Assyrian army to leave its work half done. The day after the great battle of Ardesh, the Armenians were scattered to the four winds of heaven. Thorgon and his long-swords indeed lay on the field in regular lines of rank and file, as they had fallen; but, though resisting bravely while his crest could be seen above the tumult, when their king went down, the remnant of the mountain men broke up and fled in confusion to their homes. The very stratagem that had, as it were, doubled his presence for their encouragement, served perhaps but to dishearten them the more, when they no longer beheld the royal form which had hitherto seemed ubiquitous in the fight. Every portion of his host was satisfied it had taken its orders directly from the monarch; and when at last those two mailed figures, each of which was believed to be Aryas himself, came together in the hottest of the conflict, men lay so thick about the spot, that few indeed were left to observe the fall of one and disappearance of the other warrior, either of whom might have been their king. Through many a league of mountain pass and tangled brake, fording the torrent or scouring the wind-swept plain, fled broken bands of fugitives, panting, scared, disarmed, looking wildly over their shoulders for the fierce and terrible foe, who spared not where he conquered, and when he lifted sword or javelin, never failed to drive it home.

But there was one troop of horsemen, scanty in number, yet formidable in appearance, that although fighting on the side of victory had suffered considerable loss. Returning towards the south in fair and orderly retreat, it yet bore no symptoms of discomfiture or flight. The children of Anak presented rather the appearance of assailants proceeding on some promising expedition than of a solitary force wilfully deserting the cause it had espoused. They restrained their invincible little horses to a steady regulated pace, halting at

frequent intervals to show a bold front in case of pursuit from friend or foe. Their arms were bright, and held in readiness; their bearing was haughty and full of confidence; even the wounded sat firm and upright in their saddles, and at any moment all seemed prepared to resume the fray. In the centre rode their Veiled Queen, accompanied by one in Armenian armour, who seemed less a prisoner than a guest.

While the battle raged at its fiercest round the white stone which Semiramis had marked as its turning-point, Ishtar found herself carried on its tide against the very person of him whom she had come to seek. It needed but a wave of her arm to rally round her those champions who believed so simply in her supernatural attributes, with whom no horsemen in the world could counter stroke for stroke. Pressing in on their leader, they soon encircled Ishtar and Sarchedon, soon cut their way to the outskirts of the battle, and merging alike their compact with Semiramis and their own love of fighting in blind obedience to their queen, drew off in perfectly good order, to commence a steady retreat for their southern home.

The Assyrian had seen Aryas fall in fight, had noted the destruction of the long-swords, the total rout of those hardy warriors who hoped in vain to make head against his countrymen. What was left him now, but to drift with the stream of fate in the arms of the woman he loved?

The Anakim soon recognised him as the companion of their leader, when first she appeared among their tents and they knew her not. This was enough to ensure their protection and regard. At the first halt, there was even a question of receiving him as an adopted brother in the tribe; but he wanted more than a span of the necessary stature, and that project was unwillingly abandoned. Nevertheless, every man felt pledged to do him homage and defend his person to the death.

It seemed to Sarchedon that he was riding through some unreal paradise in a dream. He told Ishtar as much, while she related her trials, her sorrows, and her undeviating constancy since they parted in the desert after their flight from Ascalon. He feared to wake, he said, and find himself again in that Egyptian dungeon, from which escape seemed hopeless as from the tomb.

"Beloved," she answered, "the queen of heaven will not permit us to be tried yet further. Behold! twice has she brought you deliverance through me her servant in your hour of greatest need. It is enough. We shall be parted no more.

We will cast in our lot with these children of the wilderness: they are brave, generous, faithful; they will fence us from our enemies with a hedge of steel."

"Be it so," he answered, looking fondly in the dear face that was unveiled only to him. "Better a goats'-hair tent with Ishtar in the desert than a painted chamber and an empty heart in the palace of a king. And yet," he added somewhat wistfully, "I would fain see the inside of great Babylon again before I die."

They were crossing a fair and level plain, the mountains above Ardesh were already sinking on the horizon, and the children of the desert welcomed that smooth unvaried surface, as reminding them of the boundless tract they called their home. Presently the chief, riding warily in their rear, shouted to halt. Forming towards the point of danger, they observed a column of dust rising in the distance, as of an armed party proceeding rapidly on their track. To those observant eyes, prompt and reliable information was afforded by the lightest tokens of earth or sky. While Sarchedon could detect but a rolling yellow cloud, the sons of Anak told each other of ten score horsemen and a war-chariot travelling at speed.

They bore down, therefore, in the direction of the approaching party, forming carefully round Ishtar and her companion in case of conflict. When within a furlong of each other, both troops somewhat slackened pace, and a chariot, driven furiously towards the Anakim, was stopped at a spear-length from their chief.

Standing in it, erect and fearless before drawn bows and levelled spears, with head bared, shield lowered in token of amity, Assarac raised his unarmed hands, and cried in a loud voice, "Is it peace, O my brother?"

"Let there be peace, my brother, between thee and me," answered the chief of the Anakim; and the eunuch, getting down out of his chariot, proceeded to explain the reason of his coming and his absence in the hour of victory from the army of the Great Queen.

"Semiramis," he said, "had been grievously wounded at the very moment of triumph. If not hurt to the death, she was at least unable to retain command of the host, or even to provide for the government of her empire at home. Therefore must he hasten back to Babylon, that he might rule wisely and in accordance with the laws of Shinar, while the queen's authority was thus for a space in abeyance. New times were coming—a new policy, perhaps a new dominion. Those who were so skilful to rein a steed and wield a sword must ever be

welcome to a warlike government, such as could alone control the sons of Ashur. He had it in his power to offer the Anakim a tract of fertile country, a land of corn and wine and oil, in which to dwell at ease, ruled by their hereditary chief and subject to their fathers' laws. Would they not hold it of the Great Queen by service of bow and spear, each man sitting under his own vine and his own fig-tree, doing that which seemed good in his own eyes?"

The Anakim glanced doubtfully at each other; their chief pointed to the mare from which he had dismounted, and shook his head.

"I could not breathe Lotus-flower," said he, "in the confines of such a tract. Like the wild ass, whose speed she laughs to scorn, her limbs would stiffen if she might not stretch them on a plain boundless as the sky that meets it on every side."

"There is rich spoil to share," urged the eunuch. "Herds of sheep, oxen, and camels, droves of captives—men, women, and children—wine, jewels, goodly raiment, and gold to be had for the asking."

The other stooped his tall person to bend his bow against the hollow of his foot and ease its string.

"All these," he answered, "I can have by the tightening of this weapon in my hand. What need I more than the inheritance of my fathers—the desert sun, the trackless sand, and the goods of every man whose spear is a span shorter than mine own? Go to, thou lordly son of Ashur! my portion is better than thine. I have spoken. Take a gift from thy servant, and depart in peace."

Assarac would never have been in his present position had he admitted the impossibility of an enterprise because of its first failure.

"I will accept the gift of my brother," said he, receiving with exceeding courtesy a loaf of barley-bread and a handful of dried dates, offered by one of the Anakim at a signal from his chief. "May it be returned to him a hundredfold when he encamps without the gate of Babylon, and I, even I, Assarac, governor of the city, bow my head at the door of his tent to do him honour! If we may not draw bow again side by side in battle, at least let there be peace between thy people and my people, so that a son of Ashur, meeting a child of Anak in the wilderness, shall cast his spear down before him and say, Is it well with thee, O my brother?"

Pausing to mark the effect of these friendly sentiments, and observing that they were well received by his listeners,

the eunuch turned to Sarchedon, and continued in a lighter tone—

"There is indeed a new dominion in Babylon when those laws of the land of Shinar have been set aside which sentence to death that Assyrian-born who shall be found arrayed in war-harness against the banner of Ashur. And therefore, Sarchedon, if thou art a prisoner amongst these my brethren, I will ransom thee at a royal price. If a friend, I will bid thee leave them for a space, to their profit and thine own. If a captain and leader, I will promote thee to yet higher honour in the great army that has never known defeat."

Sarchedon, glancing doubtfully at Ishtar, noted the colour fade from her cheek ere she drew the veil over her face. Nevertheless, the tempter was skilled in his art; and the prospect of once more bearing arms with his countrymen was too welcome to be dismissed.

"I would fain return to the land of my fathers," said he, "and ride to battle with my brethren in burnished armour and costly raiment once more. But yet it is better to dwell in the desert with a whole skin than to writhe on a stake in the sun, even though it be over against the palace of a king. If I came in the light of the Great Queen's countenance, behold, she would consume me in her wrath. If Ninyas reigned in her stead, my death might peradventure be more merciful, but more speedy also, and no less sure."

Assarac had a purpose to serve, and the lie glided smooth and facile from his lips.

"Semiramis," he answered—and even now, in this his hour of fierce revenge and mad disloyalty, he could not speak that name without a quiver of the lip, a tremble of the voice —"Semiramis sickens in her tent with a death-hurt. Ninyas her son, sunk in sloth and pleasure, lover of the garland, the wine-cup, and the couch, would soon weary of the sceptre as he wearied of the sword. The Assyrian ruler needs a wise brain and a long arm. The Assyrian people look for qualities in their kings that are the attributes of their gods. Ninus will never return to us from the stars; but Ninus was less powerful than Nimrod, even as Nimrod himself was weaker than Ashur, from whose loins he sprang. Why should we, his descendants, owe allegiance to any earthly power? Why should kings, queens, and princes come between Baal and the people of his choice?"

The audacious project of wresting from the line of Nimrod that dynasty it had held with so strong a hand, and substituting a hierarchy of which he should himself be the head, had

long appeared to Assarac a feasible project enough — one worthy of his own tameless energy and insatiable ambition, although the temptation had been stifled hitherto by his loyalty, his devotion to the queen. Now, in the torture of a vexed heart and wounded spirit, he swore to cast aside every sentiment but revenge, at least till Semiramis was at the mercy of him whose fidelity she had used, and scorned, and outraged without remorse. Therefore, it would be well, he thought, to strengthen his hands with all the weapons he could seize, to make such friends for himself on every side as should become willing tools, to ply at need, and cast away at will. When he met them by chance in the plain, it struck him that the Anakim would be no contemptible auxiliaries; when he found Ishtar and Sarchedon in their midst, he reflected that the maiden might still be made a bait, if necessary, for the allurement of Ninyas; Sarchedon, according as events fell out, might form a snare, a bribe, or a punishment for the Great Queen. That she believed him to have been killed, and in her agony of sorrow thought to raise him from the dead, he knew by the evidence of his own senses, and although the Armenian habit, in which he now recognised Sarchedon, convinced him of her error, the bitterness of his anguish seemed rather enhanced than modified by this discovery that the object of her desire was not yet wholly out of reach. It was scarcely jealousy he experienced, for jealousy implies possession, past, present, or prospective; it was rather that morbid recklessness of despair, which pulls down the whole edifice on its own head, if only the idol may be crushed and buried in the ruins of its shrine. Could he have hated her as sincerely as he wished, he would, perhaps, have triumphed, and, favoured by circumstances, might have held the proud Semiramis in his power, if only for a day; but when did man ever succeed in any perilous enterprise who suffered his heart to paralyse his arm, the outcry of his affections to drown the promptings of his brain? Nevertheless, it was his present object to gain over Sarchedon, and after a pause, as of deep consideration, he spoke out with a semblance of the utmost frankness—

"Hearken, my son. Let nothing be kept back between thee and me. Baal, though he lead a host in heaven, needs also an army here on earth. That army must have a captain. He who has set the battle in array for friend and foe, at home, in Egypt, here among the mountains of the north, is surely well fitted to command the warriors of the Assyrian god. When Assarac declares his will from the altar before his

temple at home, Sarchedon shall stand forth in shining raiment, chief and Tartan of the great Assyrian host. Said I well, my son? and wilt thou not follow me in all haste to Babylon?"

He had bought him, he thought, for a price, and, through him, that foolish girl, together with this formidable tribe of stalwart simple-minded warriors.

Again Sarchedon glanced at Ishtar; but her veil was down, and she made no sign.

"To lead the host!" he muttered thoughtfully. "To have the power of Ninus, and wield it wisely, as did Arbaces!"

"Ponder it well, my son," said the eunuch solemnly, "while I speed on to prepare the way. What art thou here?" he added, lowering his voice. "A hostage in a foeman's camp at a woman's will. Behold, I can make thee the noblest leader on earth, and she, this veiled queen of a handful of horsemen, shall sit on the throne of a province larger than the great northern land we went out to conquer. What Baal offers, do not thou despise. Go to! Stretch forth thy hand, and take it whilst thou canst. To-morrow it may be too late. I have spoken."

Then, with a courteous farewell to the Anakim, he mounted into his chariot, and was gone, speeding, like some pestilent wind, towards the south on his mission of treachery, rebellion, and revenge.

CHAPTER LVI

REQUITED

"I HAVE cast stones in the air to fall on mine own head! I have knelt at the stream, and, lo, the waters were bitter and defiled! O Kalmim, there is neither faith, nor honour, nor gratitude in Ninyas, the son of Ninus. May the king live for ever!"

She laughed outright. It was a rare jest to behold Sethos in a vein of serious reflection; above all, to hear him revile the prince to whom, through good and evil, he had been a devoted servant, notwithstanding the vices, caprices, and heartless ingratitude of his lord.

"You are but a child," she answered lightly, "and for all your downy lip and shapely limbs, not yet fit to run alone. Trust a strained bow, a frayed string, a blown horse, or a baffled woman—all these will quit them better in the hour of need than a king on the throne, whom you have served when he was a captive in the dungeon."

They were standing together on a terrace of the royal palace in Babylon, looking over many a league of gardens, vineyards, lofty palms, thin silvery streams—vast tracts of desert sand beyond—all shining and glowing in the bright morning sun, while their own comely faces and splendid attire were rich and deep in colour as the surrounding hues of earth and sky.

A great change had indeed taken place at home, since the queen's expedition to Armenia left the city without a ruler, while its lawful prince languished a weary prisoner, losing health, energy, and all the dignity of manhood, under supervision of the priests of Baal. The return of Assarac, bearing, as he affirmed, full powers and authority on the part of Semiramis, sickening even to death in the far north, had extricated Ninyas from captivity, and placed him on the throne to which he was entitled by the laws of Shinar, the eunuch, in a secret interview, extorting a solemn oath of vengeance on the mother who had deprived him of his liberty

and his empire. Broken in health and courage by close imprisonment, acting on a frame already yielding to the effects of unbridled indulgence, the young king was but a tool in the hands of Assarac, who soon conceived the idea of making him also a mere stepping-stone to the attainment of supreme power at which he aimed. Though scrupulous in practising the usual forms and observances towards his lord, the eunuch scarcely affected to ignore his own real superiority, affirming only that his words and deeds were prompted by the immediate inspiration of his god.

"And Baal bids him store up goodly treasures for himself, you may be sure," observed Kalmim, discussing with her old admirer the character of their new and arbitrary ruler; "so that at any time he may win over the spearmen with spoil, as he secured the priests by promises, and the prophets of the grove by threats. Gold and steel, Sethos—these are the only real forces on earth, and I sometimes think there is no power that can dominate them in heaven."

"Good faith," answered Sethos, "is precious as the one and true as the other. I have never wavered, Kalmim, in my loyalty to Ninyas, nor my love for you."

"And what have they profited you?" she retorted lightly. "You stood by the prince in good and evil, eating with him the bitter morsel and sharing the cup of affliction. One fine morning, Baal forsooth sends a fat man in white to pull the king of nations out of a prison-house and put him in a palace with a royal mantle on his shoulders, and a golden sceptre in his hand. Then comes the cup-bearer who has proved his readiness to go to the gates of death with his lord, and asks to be made leader of the host and to stand on the king's right hand, in the day of his glory as in the night of his bondage. What said Ninyas to the poor youth, in answer to so modest a request?"

"He laughed in my face," replied the other, with considerable irritation. "And if there is justice in heaven it will be repaid him fourfold. May the king live for ever!"

"So much for loyalty to a prince!" she continued. "Now for truth to a woman. Have you *really* kept faith with me, Sethos, all this time? It is many a long day since you and I first met by a strange chance in the queen's paradise, and you told me—I forget what you told me, but it was something very foolish, no doubt."

"You know I have," said Sethos bitterly, almost fiercely, turning his head away while he spoke.

It was a short answer, but to a woman's ear worth a whole

series of protestations. In perception of such matters, Kalmim was no whit behind her sex. If he had but looked at her, he would have seen her blush, and surely in no encounter whatsoever should a man take his eye off his enemy. Sethos, alas, was completely at the adversary's mercy, and she trampled him accordingly.

"Well, and what has this service, also, profited you for your pains?" she asked in taunting accents, wholly unable to forbear the pleasure of tormenting him. "You have stood by me at my need faithfully, nobly, grudging nothing, keeping nothing back. When the time comes, you will ask me too to make you my captain and leader, to seat you on my right hand till I die, and, Sethos, I too—I shall laugh in your face!"

"Be it so," he answered in a grave quiet voice, so unlike his usual tones that she glanced anxiously towards him. He seemed sad and troubled, yet looked like a man whose loyalty was still unshaken and unimpeachable.

"And you are tired of it at last?" she asked, in the same mocking accents.

"It is too late to change now," was his answer, with a wan and weary smile.

"Ninyas refused you?" she continued, looking straight into his eyes.

He bowed his head in silence.

"But *I* have only laughed at you," she murmured, drawing her veil hastily over her face. "And, Sethos, have you passed your life in Babylon and not found out that liking grows with laughter as blossoms come with rain? I am not a king, I am only a woman; and I cannot deny a faithful servant who asks the reward he has toiled through storm and sunshine to attain."

He would have passed his arm round her waist, but with a dexterous twirl, the result, perhaps, of considerable practice, she placed herself out of reach.

"No," she said with imposing force and gesture, "my friend, and more than friend, this is not a time for follies such as these. Some day, when the heavy hand of Baal has been taken off this unhappy city, when men's flocks and herds and wives and children have ceased to be at the command of those who are but hewers of wood and drawers of water in the temple, I may peradventure suffer you to—to—well, to touch the tip of my finger with your lips. But now, the first duty of every son of Ashur is to cast off this hateful yoke that bows his nation to the dust. Oh that the old lion had but lived to see the white robes lording it in his well-beloved city! He

would have cleared them out with fire and sword, ay, though all the host of heaven had come down from the stars to take their part. Look at me! Oh, I know well you never take your eyes off me if you can help it; but I am serious now. Look at me, I say—a woman who in her life before never knew a thought nor care weightier than the smoothing of a plait, the planting of a bodkin: I tell you I would take up spear and shield to-morrow, if I might help to lay Assarac and his priests in their blood at the altar before which they serve. What have they done for us? What has Baal himself done for us since he has governed from the throne of Nimrod? Corn is dear, water scarce, the people starve, and the priests wax fatter, prouder, fiercer, day by day. Even Beladon, who used to be meek and gentle as a weaned child, and was indeed a personable youth, and one of my truest friends — even Beladon, I say, holds that we are to be at his beck and call without question or murmur, you and I, and every one within the hundred gates of the city wall."

"May Nisroch tear him limb from limb!" exclaimed Sethos, in high wrath; for he had long been jealous of the comely young priest's intimacy with Kalmim, and it was in no ignorance of his feelings that the latter now worked upon her listener with the hated name.

"Yes, Beladon," she continued, "though he be not so bad as some of the rest. But how long are we to bear this? How long are we to be trodden on and kept down, not by a conqueror of worlds like old Ninus, wielding bow and spear as I would handle a needle, but by a slothful priest, a eunuch forsooth, in flowing robes and linen tiara, who never lifted weapon deadlier than gilded fir-cone or fresh-gathered lotus, never bore heavier burden than jewelled casket, nor faced a fiercer enemy than the poor sheep he slays to please his god!"

"Nay, there you wrong him," argued honest Sethos. "If all that comes out of Armenia be true, never bolder champion mounted war-chariot than Assarac, the priest of Baal."

"Armenia!" retorted Kalmim, with infinite contempt—"a desert peopled by a few half-starved wretches, doubtless naked and without arms. Besides, was he not warring in the mountains under the banner of the Great Queen? I pray you, when did Semiramis ever fail to conquer where she set the battle in array? And now, by his own confession, she languishes with a death-wound, and he is not ashamed to be standing here within the brazen gates in a whole skin! Oh, it passes all patience! But I know my mistress well. Surely

never yet was that shaft feathered which could drink her life-blood. Once I loved her dearly, and she repaid my faithful service with the gratitude of—of a Great Queen, I suppose! But for all that is past and gone, I will never believe, wounded or unwounded, she could abandon the sceptre of Nimrod, or license Baal himself to usurp her authority in the land of Shinar and the city she loves to call her own."

"But Ninyas sits in the royal palace," observed Sethos, "under the mystic circle and the wings of gold. It is before Ninyas that the spearmen defile at noon, and to Ninyas that the people cry for justice in the gate at sunrise, when he is sober enough to hear."

"And how often is that?" exclaimed Kalmim. "Not once in twenty days. But are you too blind to perceive, O simple youth, that while Ninyas wears the tiara, Assarac holds the sceptre; while Ninyas fits the arrow, Assarac draws the bow? It is time Babylon were rid of both. The fire that crowns that sacred tower burns doubtless night and day; but what is that to me if it be so high up I cannot thread my needle in its light? When Baal means to rule over us in person, let him come down and show himself. I am tired of a god who never answers, call on him loudly as you will."

Such liberal sentiments would have astonished her companion more, but that Sethos, during his lord's captivity, had dwelt long enough within its sacred precincts to have lost much of his former reverence for the mysteries of the temple, of his early confidence in the unseen power of its god. He felt somewhat bewildered, nevertheless, and astray in this uprooting of a faith that seemed like a birthright to every son of Ashur, and asked helplessly—

"If Baal cannot, and Ninyas must not, and Assarac will not, succour us, to whom then are we to look?"

"To the Great Queen," answered Kalmim proudly: "never believe but she will come again in her majesty, beautiful as morning, fierce and terrible as the storm that rises with midday. I have seen her angered once, only once in all my life. I tell you, Sethos, I would rather stand in the presence of Nisroch to be consumed than face the blaze of those eyes again. She spoke not, scarcely moved a limb; but I felt as the lamb must feel when the leopard has made her spring, and there is no escape. In her love, her hatred, and her desire, she knows no bounds and acknowledges no check, yet never sunlight was welcomed by captive in a dungeon as would be that beautiful face to-day in Babylon by the people of the Great Queen."

While she spoke, she looked wistfully out over the desert towards the north; Sethos, watching her eager face, saw it brighten with a sudden gleam of triumph and hope. Following the direction of her eyes, he observed the flash of spears through a dense cloud low on the horizon, that denoted a body of horsemen on the march. Pointing towards it, Kalmim burst into tears.

"It is the Great Queen!" she sobbed. "For my sake, Sethos—for my sake, will you not be on our side?"

CHAPTER LVII

BETRAYED

PACING to and fro in the familiar cedar gallery, vexed, troubled, and impatient, Assarac shot glances of anger and defiance at the four-winged image of Nisroch, as though reproaching the god in whom he did not believe for withholding aid he would have considered it childish folly to implore. Though he had dispatched a messenger in eager haste to seek out the tents of the Anakim, and renew the offer of promotion he made to Sarchedon, so preoccupied was he, that Beladon had already prostrated himself more than once ere his superior seemed conscious of his presence. The younger priest wondered to see the resolute and subtle eunuch so changed, so worn, so saddened. He marked the restless step, the sullen gesture, the moody unquiet eye, remembering, not without pity, a caged wild beast that had been trapped and brought into Babylon, long ago by certain hunters of the mountain, as a gift to the Great Queen. Though a faithful servant enough, while a keener intellect and firmer spirit held him in subjection, he bethought him somewhat remorsefully it was time to leave his master now.

Assarac's eyes wandered over the other's figure with the unconscious stare of a sleep-walker ere they lightened into recognition, then he started and exclaimed, "How now, Beladon? Returned so soon? What tidings of Semiramis? —I mean of Sarchedon, and the children of Anak with whom he dwells?"

"Let not my lord be wroth," was the answer. "Though his servant fled through the waste like an ostrich, yet was he wiser than that foolish bird, which plies her long legs and helpless wings to meet the storm of thunder and lightning she dreads. I have heard the thunder of the queen's chariots; I

have seen the lightning of her spears. Instead of scouring the desert to seek the Anakim, lo, I turned bridle, and hastened back that I might warn my lord of her approach."

Though something seemed to tell him the information was tantamount to a death-warrant, his heart leaped up with a wild unreasoning joy.

"The queen!" he exclaimed, while the blood flew to his wan heavy cheek. "Is she then so near?"

"She will encamp to-night beneath the city walls," answered Beladon imperturbably. "She marches with the vanguard of her army; but the conquerors of Armenia cannot be many furlongs in her rear; and when the sun goes down to-morrow, the hosts of Ninyas will be increased fourfold, while the Great Queen lays her trophies and her sceptre at the feet of her son. May the king live for ever!"

Something in the cold sneering tones seemed to recall the eunuch's energies and wake him, as it were, from a dream.

"Never!" he muttered between his teeth; and seizing the other's arm in a gripe that caused him to wince with pain, he hurried out of the corridor, past the golden image of Baal, across the court of the temple, and so, through leafy thicket and level lawn, threaded its cool green paradise to the palace of the Great King. Here Beladon, notwithstanding a sufficiently good opinion of his own merits, would have excused himself from entering; but Assarac's grasp was never relaxed, and ere the younger priest could realise the imprudence of such an intrusion, he found himself in the presence of one for whom he had been alternately spy and gaoler, yet who held over him irresponsible power of life and death.

Ninyas was seated in the shade on a chair of state, ornamented and embossed with the symbols of Assyrian sovereignty, under a trellis-work whereon had been trained the luxuriant tendrils of a vine, already bending and blushing in clusters of ripening grapes. A fountain scattered its silver spray in the sunshine, while female forms, with jetty locks, transparent veils, and glancing eyes, flitted through the shade. Soft airs murmured among the flowers, birds carolled from the thicket, and the king held a half-emptied goblet in his hand. With a hasty inclination of head and body, far short of the usual ceremony observed on entering the royal presence, Assarac placed himself in front of his lord, and looking him full in the face, arrested the cup that Ninyas was raising to his lips.

"Is this a time," said he, in grave sonorous accents, "for bubble of wine and sound of timbrel—for dance and song and careless revel—the mirth that goes before destruction—the folly that is a sure forerunner of death? Rouse you, my lord, rouse you! Take bow in hand, gird your sword upon your thigh; for the watchman cries out on the wall, and even now your enemy is at the gate!"

The king's eyes, once so bright, looked dim and dull, the handsome features were flushed and soddened with excess but he set his goblet down untasted, while there seemed something of interest, even apprehension, in the tone with which he asked, "What enemy, and whence? I have but one in all the kingdoms of the earth, and she is sick unto death beyond the mountains of the north."

Again, while he smiled in scorn, came a glow of triumph on the eunuch's weary face.

"Semiramis," he answered, "is encamped within bow-shot of the wall—Semiramis, the mother of my lord the king—Semiramis, who never cast a bank against a city but she razed it to the ground—who never drew bow but she shot her arrow home—who never took account of an injury but she requited it with death! O my queen, my queen!" he added in a broken murmur, "even now the lord of earth trembles and cowers at the very whisper of your name!"

Ninyas turned pale.

"Counsel me, Assarac!" he exclaimed, while his eye roved helplessly over all the splendour and luxury that surrounded him. "If my mother enters the city, I am undone."

"Not so," answered the eunuch. "Let my lord the king go out to meet her as a son should welcome the mother of his affections bringing home the wife of his desire. Let the gates be thrown open, and the people give her greeting as she passes by. The hosts of the Great Queen are yet many a league off in the desert. Her vanguard, few in number, must be wearied sore with travel. When she enters her own city, who so fitting to provide for her safety as the son of her vows? Let him guard her like the apple of his eye, and relieve her of all care in the government of the people whom he rules."

"You know her not!" exclaimed Ninyas, much disturbed. "Where is the prison-house in Babylon that could hold her for a single day? Where is the son of Ashur who would not leap to the saddle with bow and spear at the first wave of the Great Queen's hand?"

The eunuch's answer came in firm and measured accents, though his face was distorted as with a hidden agony of pain.

"There is a prison-house from which not Ashtaroth herself could break out — from which old Nimrod might not be delivered by all the horsemen of Assyria. When my lord's servants shall surround and hew her in pieces, then may every son of Ashur bind on his headpiece a shred of the Great Queen's garments, whom he loved so well."

Ninyas laughed aloud, and, seizing his discarded goblet, drained it to the dregs.

"Enough!" he exclaimed. "She sinned against Nisroch and Baal, when she took the sceptre of Nimrod from the hand of his descendant. What am I, that I should interfere to avert her doom? And yet, I would it might be done without shedding of blood. Can we not lead her forth from the city into some desert place, and so dispose of her in safety, where she shall disturb the king no more?"

"Will my lord trust his servant?" asked the eunuch.

"I will remain here at the banquet in my palace until it is over," answered Ninyas brutally. "Let Baal be his own avenger, and let Assarac see to vindicating the honour of his god. I have spoken."

Then, clapping his hands, Ninyas summoned back the women who usually surrounded him at his revels, to dismiss the whole matter from his mind in a deep and stupefying carouse.

Leaving the royal presence, Beladon felt his arm seized once more in the eunuch's painful gripe, while Assarac muttered, half-unconsciously, such broken sentences as served to disclose the plot he had constructed, and the means by which it was to be carried out. Presently, in a few simple directions, he imparted to his subordinate the outline of his purpose, commanding him to muster all the priests and prophets in the city at the great northern gate by which the queen should enter, with knife and lotus-flower in hand; to surround these with so strong a force of spearmen as it would be impossible for the populace to break through; and then, at a given signal, to fall on Semiramis with his followers, bind her in fetters of iron, and so bring her a helpless captive into the temple of Baal. It would be a fine revenge, thought Assarac, to keep her there till the arrival of Sarchedon from the desert, and then to slay them, in each other's sight, before the altar of his god. Better still, perhaps, and worthier of his fierce mad love, to strike his own knife into her heart at the first halt of her chariot within the gate.

"I can trust you," said he, when they parted, and Beladon proposed to attest his fidelity in a great oath by the everlasting wings, "because the queen's first act, when she re-enters the city, will be to take vengeance on him who kept the door of her son's prison-house, and suffered the captive to escape."

But the wariest of mankind may leave one weak point undefended—the keenest judges of human nature will omit from their calculation some vice, prejudice, or folly, such as dominates the very self-interest of their tools. That Beladon should have disclosed a plot, on the success of which his own personal safety, his very life depended, would have been unaccountable, but for the joyous, pleasure-loving disposition which, priest of Baal though he was, could not keep his secret from a woman. Kalmim had beguiled him out of every particular before sundown, affecting, the better to deceive him, an irreconcilable enmity to the Great Queen, and entire devotion in the service of her son.

If a woman makes up her mind to duplicity, a little more or a little less counts as nothing to her conscience. She finds it as easy to profess an affection she does not feel, and a candour of which she is incapable, as to push another bodkin into her hair, lay another coat of red or white on the cheek she is not ashamed to paint. When Kalmim had resolved she would take him into captivity, it was no more possible for Beladon to resist than for the bird to escape out of the snare of the fowler. And, although the fowler was exceedingly lavish of smiles and liberal of promises, the prey found itself captured, plumed, and despoiled, with no material equivalent for utter discomfiture and disgrace.

More than a match for a score of priests, Kalmim could indeed have outwitted the whole male population of Babylon, but that she too had found her master, and was but a weak foolish woman in presence of the man she loved. To him she betook herself in her distress, imploring him to interfere at such a juncture, and prevent a crime which, with all his loyalty to his prince, seemed to Sethos too foul and unnatural to contemplate.

"There is danger also for you," she exclaimed, wringing her hands and sobbing in real perplexity. "No son of Ashur must leave the city to-night on pain of death; and yet, if the queen be not forewarned, nothing can save her from the vengeance of these bloodthirsty priests. O Sethos, Sethos, did I not love you dearly, I had never trusted you with such a mission; yet how can I bear to send you out into the very jaws of death?"

But the cup-bearer's equanimity was proof even against so formidable a consideration. Accepting her confession of attachment with a good-humoured carelessness that at any other time would have cut her to the quick, he professed his readiness to incur any amount of peril so that he might preserve Semiramis from the threatened assault, and her son from the commission of so hideous an outrage. It was agreed, therefore, that he should escape from the city at all hazards, and make his way to the tent of the Great Queen, under cover of night. To leave Babylon through any one of her gates was impracticable, so closely were they guarded by the spearmen of Ninyas under Assarac's orders; and it was only by watching a favourable opportunity during the darkest hours before the moon had risen, that Kalmim succeeded in letting her lover down from the wall by a rope, to dispatch him on his errand of life and death.

With characteristic coolness the cup-bearer received his instructions and embarked on his perilous enterprise; but Kalmim, though not a nerve failed her while, swinging in mid-air, his life depended on her steadiness of hand, had overtaxed her strength; for no sooner was the tension of the rope relaxed, and the form of Sethos lost in darkness as he sped from beneath the wall, than brain and sense gave way, leaving her pale, prostrate, and helpless on the ground.

CHAPTER LVIII

WHO IS ON MY SIDE?

RECONCILED to their change of rulers under the crafty administration of Assarac, careless who swayed the sceptre of Nimrod so long as wine was cheap and corn plentiful, the people of Babylon troubled themselves but little that the Armenian expedition seemed so tardy in returning; that Semiramis lay sick and dying, as they were told, among those northern mountains; or that Ninyas, whom they had been taught to believe a dutiful son abdicating in his mother's favour, reigned once more in her stead. Nevertheless, even among that fierce and fickle populace remained a leaven of the adoration she alone was able to inspire, and every child of Ashur at home or afield felt his dignity, his self-love, and his nationality identified with the glory of the Great Queen. They were stirred more than the eunuch expected by the news of her return; so that when it became known she was within bow-shot of the wall, and about to re-enter her own especial city, Assarac's watchful eye discerned among the multitude those signs of discontent and restlessness which precede a tumult, as lowering clouds and whitened waves indicate the coming of a storm. Groups were forming and dispersing in the street, women and children remained on the roofs and terraces of their houses, men looked expectant in each other's faces; while captains and warriors thronged the ramparts, as though an enemy were already at the gate.

Presently there came a hush and calm over all that vast assemblage, succeeded by a shiver that stirred the rippling mass from edge to edge, when the tramp of horses, the roll of a chariot, broke on the still warm air; then, wild and fierce as a defiance, though loud, jubilant, and overwhelming, rose a mighty shout from Great Babylon to welcome back her queen.

Assarac, eager and preoccupied, watching these signs of earth with more anxiety than he had ever read the stars,

felt a momentary thrill of triumph in that very enthusiasm which, uncontrolled by his own skill, must herald his doom. For a moment, in the agony of conflicting feelings, he thought it would be well could he abandon every scheme of glory and greatness, forego pride, ambition, revenge, to die at the queen's feet, and be at rest. Gazing on her as she drew near in the chariot, this temporary weakness passed away, leaving all that was evil in his nature to resume the ascendency once more. Could this be the proud Semiramis, the bright, the matchless, the beautiful? this sad and stately woman, pale with the long fatigue of woe, yet wearing in her desolation the same unrivalled beauty that had enhanced the glory of her pride? It seemed the ghost of her former self, thus bending its haughty head in acknowledgment of a nation's greeting, as she passed within the gate—a spirit too sad to be of good, too fair to be of evil, sublimed and elevated by the prescience of its doom, catching and reflecting the spectral rays of a cold clear light that dawns beyond the grave. Had she glowed, as was her wont, in all the flush and sparkle of her imperial charms, he could have found it in his heart to have spared her even then; for her dear sake, could have betrayed his followers, broken faith with his king, and forsworn himself before his god. But marking the sorrow she did not care to hide, and remembering its cause, his blood turned to gall, and he vowed with bitter oaths she should never light down from that chariot a living woman—no, not if he must hew her in pieces with his own hand.

But for the Great Queen to be forewarned was to be forearmed. In no extremity of sorrow nor of danger was it possible for her to lose that unconscious presence of mind, that instinctive power of combination, which had made her the conqueror of the world. Informed by Sethos of the conspiracy against her life, she had taken measures to defeat it wisely, calmly, promptly, yet deliberately, just as she would have sat down to besiege a fenced city, or gone out to meet an enemy in the open field. While the eunuch waited to hem her in with his priests and spearmen, Semiramis, watching her opportunity, foiled him by the suddenness of her attack. Halting her chariot in the open space immediately within the gate, and taking advantage of the astonished silence which succeeded this unexpected stoppage, the Great Queen stood erect, flung her arms above her head, and cried with a loud voice, "Who is on my side?"

Then Assarac knew that, by so much time as it took

to speak those words, he was too late; and immediately before his eyes there passed a darkness, that was as the shadow of death. From her people, who loved the very ground she trod on, rose an outcry to which their previous shouts had been but a maiden's whisper compared to the roar of a beast of prey. Swords leaped from the scabbard, strong arms beat the air, dark eyes gleamed, and dark-curled beards bristled with fierce enthusiasm, eager hate, or wild desire for blood—archers and spearmen descended like a torrent from the wall, stout champions of a hundred battles came rushing and crowding through the streets. They gathered in swarms about their queen; they hemmed her in with a circle of steel; they swore, they wept, they gnashed their teeth, they implored, they adjured her only to point out an enemy, and they would tear him limb from limb.

Never before, through all the years she reigned in Babylon, had her power seemed so absolute, her dominion so secure; yet she knew, none better, that had her outcry been deferred by one short minute, had she halted her chariot but fifty paces farther on within the city, a score of blades would have carved away life and sorrow together from her aching heart, her cheek, now so cold and pale in its bereavement, would have been for ever cold and pale in death. But not a shade of colour deepened that lovely cheek; no glitter of wrath, nor anxiety, nor even excitement of mortal strife, disturbed the scorn of those calm proud eyes, while she pointed to the eunuch, standing erect in his chariot over against her, and spoke in the clear full tones that had so often turned the tide of battle, like the trumpets of a succouring host.

"I have need of that man!" said she, stretching out her round white arm. "Sons of Ashur, I bid you fall on Assarac, priest of Baal. Slay him not, but bind him and bring him to me!"

He was no coward, yet he trembled in every joint. Perhaps the sound of her voice moved him no less than the yells of rage, the scowls of hatred, the flashes of steel that met him on every side, than the mighty rush that made at him, wave on wave, as the wolves of the forest pour on some wounded mountain-bull to get him down. He bore himself bravely, notwithstanding, calling priests and spearmen to his rescue, fitting an arrow to the bow he was never to draw again. For a moment his white-clad form towered above the press and tumult, like a sail in a troubled sea, that disappears among the breakers

ere a man has summoned courage for a second look. The priests of Baal could not resist the shock. In spite of numbers and discipline, the hired spearmen gave way. There was a rush, a recoil, an angry roar, a scuffle of feet, the crash of a broken chariot, the scream of a woman from the housetops, a horse reared high above their heads, the surging crowd divided, and on the open space emerged some half a score Assyrian warriors, dragging in their midst Assarac, priest of Baal, to the feet of the Great Queen.

Even now in this extremity of danger and disgrace, bruised, panting, dishevelled, doomed to certain death, he sought in the queen's eyes for something of sympathy, of recognition, of acknowledgment, that they had once looked kindly in his own. Of all he suffered, this was perhaps the keenest pang—that on the fair face he had loved, and hated, and worshipped so madly, there showed no more of anger than of pity. Immovable, impenetrable, but for her beauty she might have been an image of Nisroch the avenger, god of retribution and of fate. Then he laughed out loud, a strange harsh laugh that scared the guards who held him, while he thought that here in his mortal anguish, throbbing under the knife or writhing on the stake, he had power to wring and torture that proud heart still.

Before deigning to notice him, she thanked her people for their loyalty with a sad and weary smile.

"Sons of Ashur," said she, "let none persuade you I have ever believed you could fail your queen. She has but trusted you once more to-day, and nobly have you once more answered her appeal. I have spoiled for you another city; I have conquered for you another kingdom; I have journeyed far and fast to return to you. My bow is unstrung, my sword is sheathed, and I would fain rest from my labours. But Ashtaroth sleeps not in heaven, nor Semiramis on earth; and be the queen's eyes never so heavy, justice must be done by the greatest, as by the least, through the length and breadth of the land of Shinar. There is one here who has imagined evil in his heart against his ruler. Assarac, priest of Baal, what have you to say why you should not forthwith be put to death?"

With these last syllables she turned full upon him her deep inscrutable eyes, and if he had any hope of it before, he neither desired nor expected pardon now. The pitiless gaze chilled him to the marrow, while he felt, that were their positions reversed, he too could be as cold and calm and cruel as his judge. One glance of sympathy in the crowd

would have unmanned him; but he looked for it in vain. On earth he saw a dreary wavering mass of sullen faces, and in heaven a wide-winged vulture, wheeling, hovering, poising itself in the blue eternal sky. It was not his god that sustained him now, nor his sacred character, nor his priestly lore; not even the stubborn pride engrained in the nature of such spirits, destined to affect the fate of dynasties and trouble the security of an empire. No; he took refuge in the bitterness of that despair which has found and proved the worst—when love turns to hate, and faith to scorn—when the sweet springs of hope are poisoned at their source, and the vision of an angel in a halo of light changes to a mocking fiend, or a bare gaunt skeleton crowned with a grinning skull. He returned a stare of defiance, calm and contemptuous as her own.

"It is for the Great Queen to reward her servants according to their deserts," said he. "Let her ask herself if I have merited death at her hands."

"It is not Semiramis who accuses you," she retorted coldly. "By the laws of Shinar you are judged, and by them you are condemned. I have spoken."

There was no hope; none. Yet would she but look kindly on him, he could bear it bravely, he thought, and die in his utter weariness, as a man lies down to sleep. He made one last effort.

"Have I not served her," he asked, "through good and evil, in no hope of payment or reward, but for the love and loyalty I bore to the Great Queen? I have lived too long when the face of Semiramis is turned from me in anger. I ask for no pardon, no reprieve. Let her but say that she forgives me before I die!"

"I have nothing to forgive," she replied, with pitiless unconcern. "The servant has raised his hand against his ruler; the subject has conspired against his queen. Whose are these white-robed bands cowering and trembling before me, though each man carries a naked knife in his girdle, and another in his hand? Who drew up that sullen and dejected line of warriors, instructing them to bend their bows and point their spears against the leader they have followed to victory? It is not for Semiramis to ask the question, but Assyria. It is not for Semiramis to answer it, but Baal, and he cries with a loud voice, 'Assarac the priest!'"

"Who turned on her at the last!" he shouted, in a paroxysm of fury and despair. "Who bears here in his bosom the secret she would give all her empire to obtain;

but who defies and reviles the Great Queen to her face, even in the jaws of death!"

She started, and for a moment seemed uncertain how to act; but recovering herself, pronounced firmly the fatal words, "Cover his face, and lead him forth. I have spoken."

It was a sentence that could never be annulled. The eunuch felt he was doomed, and glanced instinctively upward, where the vulture passed between him and the sun. So they brought the hideous stake, and impaled him in sight of all men, that the people of Babylon might pass by to rebuke him with scoffs and curses, for a traitor who had lifted his hand against the Great Queen.

Two days, two nights, he writhed and languished in his agony. On the third morning men had become wearied of him, and he was left alone, save that the vulture floating overhead kept watch on untiring wing, and waited for him still. At sunrise there came a veiled woman, with a jar of water in her hand. His dim eye lightened, and the spasm, that should have been a smile, crossed his face, for he recognised in her gait and bearing the presence of his queen. She raised her veil to look fixedly on those dying features, so changed, so distorted — to mark the quiver of those dry cracked lips, the flutter of life that played over the blackened, withered frame.

"Speak," said she, in a low hoarse whisper, while the water rippled pleasantly in its jar. "Speak, and I will have mercy; for you shall drink and die."

He nodded assent, eyeing with piteous eagerness the deadly draught for which he longed.

"Doth he live?" she asked, and laid the jar almost against his lips.

Another nod, a convulsive choking gasp, and a roll of the half-closed eyes.

"And where?" she continued, in fierce impatience, pitiless of his sufferings, careless of all but the secret she was fain to extort, even from the dead.

It was obvious that till his lips were moistened he could not answer, if he would. She held the jar to his mouth, and he took such a long and greedy draught as dulled his mortal agony with a sense of relief from suffering that was almost joy. Again she watched those baked black lips with jealous eyes. They strove to form a word that yet died on them ere it could be uttered. Was it in mockery they trembled with certain faint syllables, that to her sense of sight, rather than hearing, seemed to indicate the desert? Was it in mockery

they smiled and writhed and gibbered ere they set themselves, fixed and rigid for evermore?

Semiramis turned thoughtfully away, and the vulture came swooping down; for he, too, had waited long and patiently to take his share of one who had been a reader of the stars, a governor of the empire, the Great Queen's favourite servant, Assarac, high-priest of Baal.

CHAPTER LIX

FORGIVEN

FOR two days, woe, perplexity, and dire confusion reigned in the temple of the great Assyrian god. Baal might be an-hungered, but they slew for him no droves of sheep and oxen; athirst, but they poured him out no drink-offerings; displeased, but they sought not favour and forgiveness with praise and prayer, because his servants looked in vain for a high-priest to interpret the commands of their deity, and the great golden image, towering sullen, and unmoved, afforded neither word nor sign. The denizens of the temple stared blankly in each other's faces, for men doubted sore in this crisis of the Assyrian hierarchy whose turn it might next be to die.

But on the third day, court and temple were once more redolent of incense and bright with flowers; altars blazed victims fell, ditches ran crimson with blood. A hundred priests leaped, howled, and cut themselves with knives, a thousand voices raised their hymn of triumph, and Beladon, chosen by direct interposition of his god, under the authority of Ninyas his king, was proclaimed high-priest of Baal, in place of the dead man, crouched yonder on his stake in an open space near the northern gate, already torn and mangled out of human likeness by the birds of prey. Careless of a fallen master, the new high-priest had turned gladly from Assarac to obtain favour in the sight of Ninyas; and that prince was content to give him honour and promotion in the meantime, waiting his own leisure to destroy him without pity or remorse. For on this third day, the son of Ninus again sat in the gate to administer justice, again shook off the fetters of sloth, and the drowsiness of winecups, to wear the royal tiara of his fathers, and carry the sceptre of Nimrod in his hand.

The people of Babylon indeed clamoured loudly for their queen, crowding the streets and terraces about her palace, rending the air with their cries, vowing vengeance on priest

and prophet, if she forbore to show herself, and even threatening the sacred person of her son. It needed all the influence of a priesthood bribed by gifts and promises, all the intimidation of an army corrupted by gold and spoil, to persuade them that she had left her faithful subjects for the realm of those divinities to whom she was akin, and that the white doves they had seen since sunrise, flitting on restless pinions through her favourite city, were but so many messengers from the spirit-world, bidding a nation of mourners take comfort for the departure of the Great Queen.

It was to Beladon that Ninyas intrusted the promulgation of this strange belief, resolving that so soon as the tumult had subsided, so soon as he was himself firmly established on the throne, it would be wise to destroy the only power that rivalled his own in the land of Shinar, by the slaughter of their new high-priest, and general destruction of the worship of Baal, in favour of Nebo, Nisroch, or some other deity, over whose servants he would take care to retain undisputed influence and control. For in the golden morning, lying tossing and troubled on his couch, a deep sleep had fallen on Ninyas, even with the rising of the sun, and he had dreamed a dream, or seen a vision, such as moved even that heart of his, so hardened by years of vice and self-indulgence, brought the unaccustomed tears to those eyes blinded by folly, sensuality, and sin.

He dreamed that he was a child once more—a tender happy child, triumphant in a new toy, or a treasure of fruit and flowers, loving, hopeful, and believing in his mother, the queen, as he believed in the light of day. He thought she came to his bedside carrying a fair and bending lotus in her hand; that she withheld from him the flower, resisting alike his prayers, his caresses, and his tears; that in his impatience and childish wrath, he seized the white caressing hand and bit it till the blood came, striking and buffeting the while so fiercely that his efforts seemed to wake him, and yet he could not rise, though he knew that he lay there a grown man, stretched on his own royal couch, struggling with the influence of a dream. He must be helpless, he felt, and passive—chilled, shivering, speechless—so long as those reproachful eyes held him in their gaze, so long as that stately figure bent over him so tenderly, that pale sad face confronted his own in the shadow of an unearthly beauty, that awed him with the majesty of death. His tongue clave to the roof of his mouth, yet it seemed loosened, and his senses were freed from their

heaviest restraint, when the vision addressed him; for was it not his mother's voice? And in spite of the injuries she had inflicted, in spite of injustice, treachery, all that had come and gone, those tones were liquid with a music that could still dominate his spirit, still soften and subdue his heart. "Ninyas," she said, "beloved, has it come to this, that my son could thirst for his mother's blood?" He almost believed while she spoke there were red drops on the white hand that had tended and fondled him from a child. Twice he raised his eyes to hers, and cast them down in very shame; twice he essayed an answer, and his lips refused to form the words; but the third time he took courage, and, with a great effort, exclaimed, "Forgive me, mother; for I have sinned! I am unworthy to reign in Shinar; I am unworthy even to draw bow among the sons of Ashur! Yet forgive me, mother; for am I not your son?"

A smile, unspeakably sad and tender, came over the pale fair face. "I have forgiven," said she, "although the arrow from my son's quiver bit into my very heart. Listen, Ninyas: it was foretold long ago, by one who read the stars, and who knows doubtless, ere now, whether he read them right—it was foretold, I say, by this wise man, that when the spear on which she leaned at her utmost need should break and wound her hand, then must the doves that nourished her childhood come back to lead Semiramis away, and the sons of Ashur must wander to and fro through old Nineveh and mighty Babylon, and all the wide bounds of the land of Shinar, asking each other in vain for tidings of the Great Queen. I mourned in sorrow and sadness, but my son was yet left to me, and I leaned on him as his father was wont to lean after battle on his spear. My spear is broken, my son has failed me; he would reign unvexed, unwearied by the counsels of his mother. Go to! He will never look on that mother's face again."

He fell into a great sweat and trembling; with a desperate effort, he leaped like a young lion from his couch, to fall at her feet and clasp her knees, and detain her even by force, that he might make amends. Alas, he grasped the empty air! He searched in vain with eager gaze throughout the chamber, and looked only on coloured carvings and vermilion roof, on alabaster columns, scarlet hangings, winged monsters tipped with gold, all the pomp and symbols of imperial sovereignty, his own without question now, because she was gone for evermore. Then he burst into a passion of tears, and so, draining the flagon of Damascus wine that stood by his couch, felt

comforted, and went out among his people with diadem and sceptre, feeling in his heart that at last he was really an Assyrian king.

As the day waned, and the populace, who had been feasted at the royal expense, found themselves refreshed with food and gladdened by wine, discontent gave way to hilarity, and anxiety for the fate of their queen lapsed into easy indifference, or a stupid satisfaction in those supernatural attributes, by which they were taught to account for her disappearance. It was credited of all men that she had been claimed by the unearthly order of beings to which she belonged; that she had only been intrusted for a time to the Assyrians, for the completion of their national glory; and that now, having fulfilled her mission, she was summoned back by kindred spirits, who, in the form of doves, birds she always prized and cherished, were to-day flitting in unusual numbers about the city of her choice.

Kalmim, whose eyes were red with weeping, stoutly supported the general belief, finding in it, no doubt, a salve for certain qualms of conscience she could not but entertain, regarding her own varying loyalty towards the mistress she served. This nimble-tongued tirewoman found herself regretting many a hint she had thrown out, many a petty scandal she had promulgated in derision of the Great Queen. To have seen her back in the royal palace, to have smoothed her robes, tired her head, and done her bidding once more, Kalmim would willingly have given all she prized in the world, except perhaps the affection of Sethos, whom she now claimed as her own possession, by every rite of love and law known in the land of Shinar. Standing with him on a house-top over against the temple of Baal, and marking with fond eyes how his bright young face glowed in the parting rays of a sun already touching the horizon of the desert, she could not forbear a sigh of pity for one whose lot, in spite of beauty, glory, and power, seemed so dark and sad, compared to her own.

"She had everything Baal and Ashtaroth could bestow," observed Kalmim, looking lovingly in her companion's face. "And see what has been the end. To hover, like an evil spirit, saddened and restless, about the place that is still bright with her glory, and then to vanish, none can tell where, like a cloud that comes up from the desert with promise of rain, and while man and beast are yet athirst to welcome it, lo, it has passed over, and is gone."

"We shall see her no more," answered Sethos. "Nor shall

we see one like unto her again. Since Ashur came down from the stars to lead them, his children have known but one Great Queen. Of a surety, it is enough! Another Ashtaroth would set the heavens in a blaze; another Semiramis would be too much for the vexed earth to sustain."

She glanced at him sharply, but his features wore their usual expression of placid and somewhat languid content.

"She was not happy," said Kalmim, as if puzzled to account for the anomaly. "And yet she had wisdom, fame, courage, riches, unlimited empire, and, O Sethos, beauty surpassing even the daughters of the stars!"

"The last is the gift you grudge her most," observed the cup-bearer, with a quiet smile, as of one who directs his shaft, though without malice, straight towards its mark.

But instead of flushed denial or indignant retort, he was surprised to note on Kalmim's face an expression of real apprehension. She turned quite pale, while she replied—

"It is a fatal possession for the owner, when spoilers can be found who scruple not to share in it by the strong hand. O Sethos," she added, with a shudder, pointing to the temple of Baal, "there is but one man I fear in the whole of Babylon, and he stands, night and morning, before the altar of his god, the second in power through all the land of Shinar, after my lord the king."

Sethos laughed outright, whereat, in Kalmim's eyes, displeasure took the place of fear.

"Listen," said he, "and remember that I am not given to vain words, but that I speak only so much as I surely know. Do you dread the handful of bleached bones, the few dangling strips of blackened flesh, that were once that famous eunuch who made himself chief counsellor of princes, mightiest leader of armies in all Assyria, and great interpreter of the god he worshipped, to rule, as it seemed, rather than to obey? I tell you, Kalmim, that Assarac, withering yonder on his stake, is as much to be feared as comely Beladon, now high-priest of Baal. I tell you that I had rather change places with the one who has known and proved the worst than with the other, who has yet to learn the mercies of Ninyas for such as thwart his projects or stand in the way of his convenience."

"What mean you?" she asked. "Are you in the secrets of my lord the king?"

"He has shown favour to his servant," answered the other with mock gravity, "since the days of his youth, when I filled his cup to the brim at the bidding of Ninus, now driving a golden chariot amongst the stars. He has not forgotten that

I waited dutifully at his footstool, while he wore sackcloth in his prison-house, as he had been clad in purple on a throne. Above all, he remembers that, but for me, he would have sinned a hideous sin against the Great Queen; therefore is my place at his right hand in his secret chamber; therefore can I tell you, Kalmim, that Beladon and his priests are doomed, and that the jackals you hear now howling beneath the wall shall scarcely wait another moon ere they tear them limb from limb. Beladon is thine enemy and mine. What am I that I should set myself against the counsels of my lord the king?"

She drew a deep sigh of relief. The tirewoman was happy now, and had reached the haven of her rest; yet, even in her fulness of content, there crept a dreary sadness about her heart, while she thought on the vanished glories of the mistress she had served and loved, marvelling, even while she mourned, at the strange departure and sad mysterious fate of the Great Queen.

CHAPTER LX

LOST IN THE DARK

AS in the heart of man, seared, desolate, and lonely though it be, there remains a tender spot, bearing remembrance of the tears that freshened it long ago; so in the wildest tract of desert is hidden some green and pleasant place where, even should the leaf be faded or the well-spring dry, lingers a certain sense of peace, freshness, and repose, a faint but precious echo from the drip and murmur of the drowsy waters, and the breeze whispering through the palms.

In such a refuge, many a league from the stir and turmoil of crowded Babylon, had Sarchedon unstrung his bow, and laid his spear aside. Notwithstanding the promises of Assarac, and the promptings of a martial spirit, he had yielded to the persuasions of her he loved, satisfied, after all his perils and adventures, to have gained the one treasure he coveted, and to keep it in his own possession for evermore.

Under the protection of his adopted brethren—for the Anakim, overlooking comparative deficiency of stature in consideration of courage and prowess, had received him into their tribe—and secured on all sides by the unbroken expanse of desert that surrounded him, he felt he had nothing to dread from the vengeance of Ninyas, nor even from pursuit by the Great Queen. These might rule unquestioned over many a fair and fertile province of their mighty empire, bearing absolute sway wherever forest waved or river flowed, wherever brick was laid on brick for human habitation, or smiling surface, tilled by human hands, grew fat with corn, and wine, and oil; but was not their boundless waste the heritage of the sons of Anak? and scouring it at all seasons, as in all directions, how were they to be eluded by assailants who would penetrate into their dominion? what tactics or what stratagems could foil those watchful eyes, keen as the vulture's poised in their burning sky, those matchless horses, swift and untiring as the wind that swept their desert sands?

"We are indeed safe, my beloved," said Sarchedon, after

recapitulating the many difficulties with which an enemy who sought them would have to contend. "Safer here than we should be in the fortress of Ascalon, guarded by wall and rampart, bristling with bow and spear; for while the chariots of our foes were labouring far beyond the horizon, one of our long-limbed brethren would come galloping lightly in to give us warning, and even if they ever reached our nest, it would be cold many hours before they found it. I should be loath to leave it too," he added, surveying with extreme content the pleasant refuge in which they had taken up their rest; "for in all the paradises of Babylon was never so green and lovely a spot as this!"

Contrasted with the arid waste that stretched around them to the sky, it seemed, indeed, a fair and peaceful retreat. Like the mirage of the desert, it was adorned by a knot of waving palms, a glittering lake, a breadth of verdant pasture, a thicket of tufted grass, bending reeds, and aromatic shrubs. Like the mirage too, it was difficult to find, but unlike the mirage, it was dotted with a goat's-hair tent, at the door of which, smiling and unveiled, she sat for whose sake Sarchedon had abandoned friends, fame, ambition, country: his treasure, his pearl of price, the fairest woman in all the earth—but one.

"I dread only Ninyas," said Ishtar. "For I know the young king's wilful spirit, and the proud heart that cannot endure to be crossed or thwarted in its desire. Only Ninyas for myself," she added, with a wistful smile, "and—and the Great Queen for you."

"The Great Queen!" he repeated, laughing lightly. "Ere now I must surely have had more than one successor, and doubtless I am forgotten, as though I had never been; indeed I hope—I hope it may be so."

While he reiterated his wish, she looked sharply and inquiringly in his face, withdrawing her eyes, however, in some confusion, when his glance met her own. He perceived it not, and Ishtar scarce knew whether she was vexed or gratified to mark how the jealous anxieties of love had thus been quenched in the frank confidence of possession, but on reflection set his blindness down to the engrossing nature of his occupation, for he was busy shaping one of those short thick clubs used by desert horsemen in chase of the ostrich, to be hurled at the bird's long legs, while they rode her down.

"I shall be back at sunset," said he, putting the finishing touch to his wooden weapon, and loosing the tether of his horse ere he sprang to the saddle, "then shall Ishtar have at

her tent-door such a tuft of plumes as were never seen even before the pavilion of the Great King."

She was scanning the far horizon with anxious eyes.

"I pray you go not forth, beloved," she murmured. "There is a dull blurred line yonder, where sand and sky meet. Already the whirlwind is stirring in his sleep. Surely, he will wake up in his fury before night."

Her lord laughed and shook his bridle, waving a light farewell as he rode away; while Ishtar turned wistfully into the tent and wondered if he never regretted enterprise, fame, ambition, all he had foregone for her sake; if he never let his thoughts wander back to the matchless beauty and fatal smile of the Great Queen.

So the woman pondered, half in sadness, asking untoward questions of her own anxious heart, and the man sped merrily over the plain, rejoicing in the freedom of the saddle, leaving care to plod hopelessly in his tracks, as he galloped on. But though his eye brightened and his soul rejoiced, because of the boundless waste and the free desert air, there was death in his right hand. The poor ungainly ostrich lay bleeding at his feet, her legs broken by his skill, her wings despoiled of their precious tufts, to make a gift for the woman he loved.

The sun was yet high when he turned bridle towards his home, and peering about him in search of those scarce perceptible inequalities on its surface, which form the landmarks of the wilderness, he found cause to remember Ishtar's warning; while for a moment his heart stood still, with a sense of coming danger, such as braces the brave man for mortal conflict, and bids the coward tremble with mortal fear. Where the palms that nodded above his tent should have broke the level sky-line, there was no horizon now. Only shifting misty shadows, dull, dim, and tawny, a fusion of earth and heaven. He could bear to look on the sun too, glowing yonder like a ball of burnished copper, and he knew what that rim of violet foretold —a cruel portent—beautiful exceedingly. There was a falling glitter in the air, as if it were raining gold, and his horse snorted violently, betraying symptoms of restlessness and alarm. Oh for Merodach now! Merodach, whose bones were bleaching far away, where the dead lay in heaps under the wall of Ardesh.

He pressed into a gallop, nevertheless; for a dun cloud-like column, growing in height and volume as it approached, was moving steadily towards him, in many whirls and gyrations, yet, fast as he rode, gaining on him with every stride. The sky had darkened, and the fine particles of sand

with which the air was filled blistered his skin, choking his nostrils and penetrating into his very lungs. Then the mighty rush of the whirlwind roared in his ears, turning his linen head-dress over his face, driving man and horse before it in an opaque impenetrable cloud of sand. He had once dreamed of such a death. Could this be his fate, and had it indeed overtaken him at last? He thought of Ishtar at the tent-door, looking for one who never came; he thought of the other woman who had loved him—his temptation, his evil spirit, his enemy, beautiful and wicked, Semiramis the Great Queen.

Driving on, as a ship at sea drives before the tempest, he was aware of certain phantom shapes, some few spear-lengths off, that loomed gigantic in the fatal cloud. Were they real or but creatures of his brain, already maddened by a sense of suffocation? Perhaps demons of the simoom, triumphant, derisive, rejoicing in his destruction. No; they were surely earthly forms—two or three horsemen plunging up to their girths, and a dromedary in the midst. Were they waving to him for help, or only struggling and gesticulating in blind perplexity, in the agony of a fierce despair? The whirlwind drove him nearer, nearer yet. He could distinguish the reddened eye of the dromedary, and its distended nostril craving for a breath of air, while choked with sand.

There came another mighty rush and roar to stun him as with a blow. Half conscious, he was aware of a face that moved before him through the gloom like a vision of the night—a dreamy face, calm, fearless, beautiful, smiling its sad farewell. Even at such extremity his heart leaped up with keen guilty throbs, for in that passing vision it recognised the face of the Great Queen.

Deeper and thicker grew the darkness; louder and fiercer roared the storm. A gleam of white seemed to flit before his eyes ere they were blinded by the driving sand. His horse struggled, fell, and rose again, trembling with exhaustion and fear; but the air had cleared now, and he could see, half a bow-shot before him, a fair dove winging her flight calmly on towards the light of day. Looking back to where his peril had been shared by those shadowy wayfarers, he only noticed a few slight undulations on the surface of the desert—a rolling wave or two of sand to mark the terrible track of the simoom, and hide his buried secrets, whatever they might be.

Following the dove, as it flitted before him, Sarchedon rode slowly on, pondering many things in his heart, but never taking his eyes off the bird that was guiding him home. At

sunset, lighting down beneath the palms he loved, it circled twice round his head and disappeared within the darkness of his tent. Entering in, he was encircled by the arms of Ishtar, who laid her cheek against his breast, and wept for very joy because of his safe return.

"Where is the dove," he asked, "that flew before me through the tent-door even now?"

"There is no dove here but me," said Ishtar tenderly. "O Sarchedon, for you I would ever be the Bird of Love!"

He looked fondly down in those trustful pleading eyes. "The Bird of Love," he answered, "and better, dearer still—the Bird of Peace!"

THE END

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